

THE LONDON READER

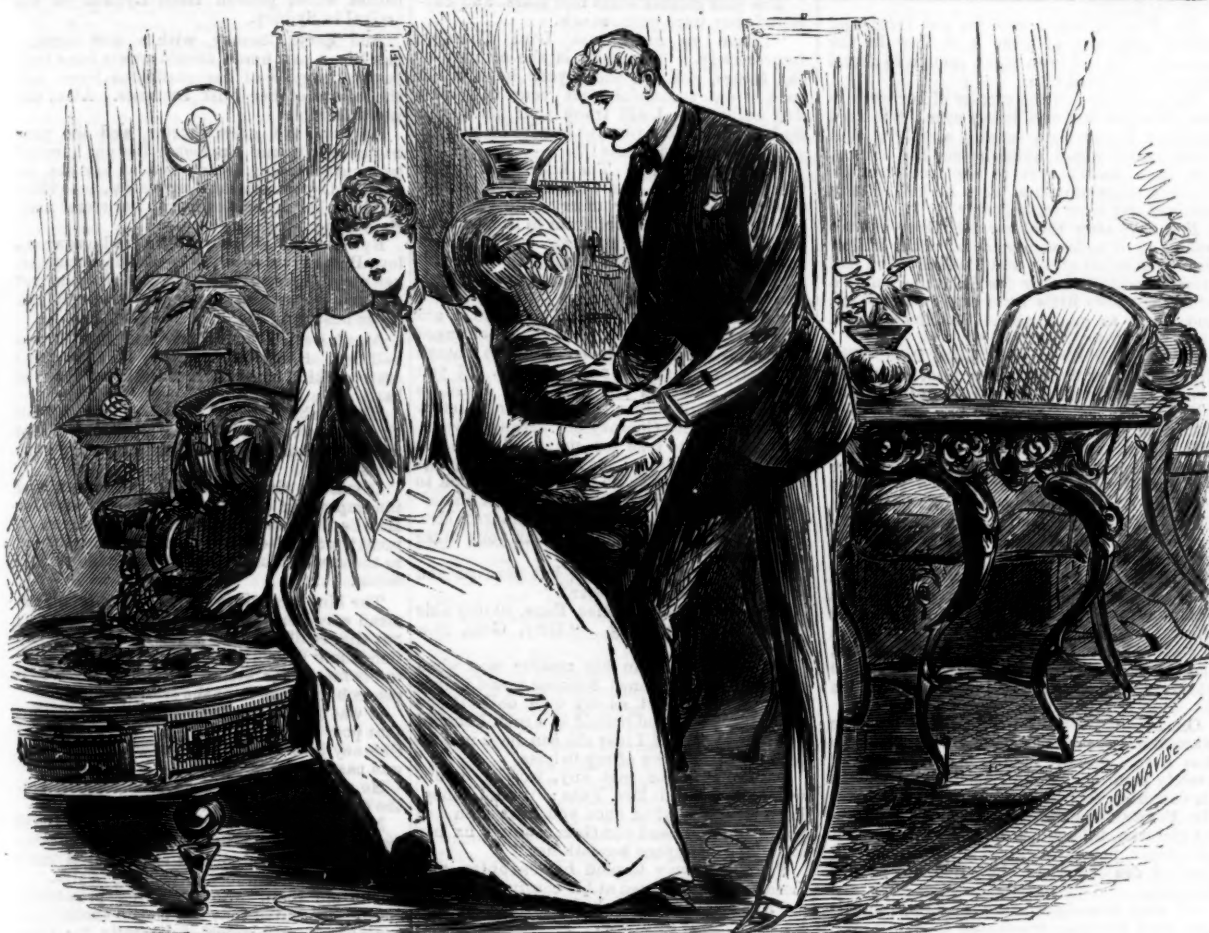
of Literature, Science, Art, and General Information.

[ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.]

No. 1468.—VOL. LVII.]

FOR THE WEEK ENDING JUNE 20, 1891.

[PRICE ONE PENNY.]



["DO YOU LIKE ME, JESSY—JUST A LITTLE?" SAID DR. CAMPBELL.]

BERYL'S SECRET.

CHAPTER XV.

No time had ever seemed so long to Beryl Chesney as the hours of that eventful journey from The Towers to Glenfriars. At the best it was a tedious business, since there being no cross-country route from North Essex to Mid-Warwickshire she was obliged to go up to London first, and then, after crossing the metropolis in a cab, catch a train at Euston for Garby Junction.

Starting after a sleepless night, her heart sore for the death of the grandfather who had loved her so well, a strange sense of desolation overpowering her, a haunting dread for her future—poor Beryl's mind would have been full enough of anguish without the last blow of all—the telegram from Mrs. Arnold, saying that there was "great trouble about B."

Poor Beryl! Here was a sinless secret, but how bitterly she had suffered from it no tongue can tell. It seemed to her sometimes that it must be at least twenty years

instead of five since she had been Mrs. Selwyn's little nursery governess, Gem Fane, and had in an evil hour learned to love her employer's kinsman—handsome, courtly, Basil Lyndon.

Even now, after all these years, after the bitter suffering through which she had learned he was faithless, poor Beryl could not quite hate the man who had made her week's honeymoon one dream of happiness. Alas! the awakening from that dream had come soon enough.

Susan Smith was the destroyer of poor Beryl's happiness; and, alas! she acted as, so many mistaken people do, with the very best intentions.

She did not understand Beryl, and she could not brook the idea of the girl's pretty face spoiling his family's plans for the heir of Lyndon. But she had a great respect for Walter Fane, and she was horrified at what she thought the other alternative, namely, that Mr. Basil should break Gem's heart by winning her affections for a pastime. Little did she guess the girl was his wife.

Lady Elton's housekeeper took on herself to

act the part of Providence, and in so doing wrecked two lives.

She took from the hall table the letter in which Basil asked his wife to meet him at the Crystal Palace. She opened it, and when she had read its contents decided they must never reach Gem.

Obtaining leave of absence the good woman started off for Brixton, and saw at a glance that some anxiety besides her father's death pressed on Gem.

Mrs. Smith had ways and means. Two days after she reached Brixton "Miss Fane" received a letter signed "Basil Lyndon," in which the writer announced his speedy departure for Sydney, and declared that all must be over between them.

"I am quite aware," ran this cruel letter, "I may have given rise to hopes I am unable to fulfil, and I would offer you pecuniary compensation if I did not feel it would insult you. My father has shown me the duty I owe to my family. My wife you never can be, and at his wish I give up even the thought of seeing you again."

When Gem read that letter it had but one

meaning to her. Their marriage was illegal. Utterly ignorant, poor child, of the law on such matters she supposed that the fact of her being under age, and not having had her father's consent to the union, would make it invalid.

She never accused Basil, even in her thoughts, of knowing this from the first. She believed firmly that he had considered her his wedded wife up to the time of his interview with his father.

Sir Paul informed him he was free; and taking advantage of some legal flaw in the ceremony, he had been mean enough to desert the girl who loved him.

Susan Smith saw the success of her work in the girl's pale face and heavy eyes. She need not have feared Gem sending a reply to that letter, which would quite destroy her scheme, and open Basil's eyes to the fact that the flippant, ungrammatical note he had already received was from an impostor.

For days after the blow fell Gem was too weak and ill to leave her room. Poor Walter Fane was in his grave, and Basil Lyndon had started with his father for Australia before a white, shadowy little form crept downstairs, and began to move about the house like a poor, pale little ghost.

Susan Smith returned to Elton Park. The first part of her plot had succeeded. She only hoped that Mr. Lyndon would not continue the correspondence, as she could not manage always to be at hand to intercept his letters.

But fate was playing into her hands with almost amazing kindness. The very day after the housekeeper left Brixton two strangers called at Rose Cottage and asked to see Mrs. Fane—an old man, tall and stately, and a sweet-faced woman near middle age, who might have been his daughter.

Lord Chesney broke his errand very simply. The packet her husband had begged Mrs. Fane to post after his death had but just reached its destination. The lawyer to whom it was addressed had been taking holidays, and the communication being marked "private," his partner had not liked to open it.

On Mr. Grover's return he had at once taken the letter to Chesney Towers. He knew that Lord Chesney, having lost his son, had bitterly mourned over his estrangement with his daughter, and he believed he would grant Mr. Fane's dying prayer, and give a home to the girl who, though she was only the child of an obscure, poverty-stricken surgeon, was still the last descendant of the grand old race of Chesney.

"I may have been harsh, madam," and it cost Lord Chesney something to admit even so much as that, "but I am ready to do my utmost to atone for the past. I will take my grandchild home and make her mistress of The Towers. If she pleases me she shall be my sole heiress. If not, I will provide that she shall never want. I make but two conditions."

"I can guess one of them," said Mrs. Fane, sadly. "In coming to you Beryl is to learn to be a stranger to us. We shall never see her again!"

Then Marion Bolton spoke for the first time.

"It is hard on you after being her mother for so many years; but, indeed, we will do our best to make her happy. I am Lord Chesney's housekeeper and cousin, and if Beryl comes to us I will do my utmost to make her happy."

"Hush, Marion!" interposed the peer. "Walter Fane leaves his daughter expressly to me if I will accept the charge. I doubt whether this lady has power to refuse me the custody of my grandchild, but I wish to part friends, for Beryl's sake!"

Mrs. Fane conquered the sob that rose in her throat.

"I think I can understand your feelings. If Beryl goes with you, she can never be our sunbeam again. You prefer a sharp, decisive breaking off of all old ties, instead of letting

them die a lingering death? And I think you are right. I love Beryl dearly, but as Beryl Chesney she can never be to me what little Gem Fane is now. I would rather lose her altogether than that she should just give us the stray fragments of her time, and perhaps grow ashamed of her brothers and sisters."

"Then you have children of your own?"

"I have five!"

"And what are their prospects?"

The poor mother burst into tears, and confessed they were poor enough.

"Listen to me," said Lord Chesney, impressively. "Australia is the country of the future, and out there your boys would soon grow successful, and your daughters find husbands. I will frank your passage to Sydney, and allow you five hundred a-year!"

"Five hundred a-year!"

"Just so, madam. The interest of twelve thousand pounds. As your children successively come of age or marry, two thousand will be advanced to start them in life, or to be settled on them before their wedding, and your own income be accordingly diminished."

"But we have not the slightest claim upon you, Lord Chesney?"

"I am a rich man, Mrs. Fane, and I am sorry to think of all the years I was estranged from your husband. I should like to smooth the path of his wife and children. If you settle in Australia the only boon I ask is that you will never mention your step-daughter as Miss Chesney of Chesney Towers. I mean Beryl to take my name. I hope she will be my heiress; but prosperity brings many enemies, and I do not want anyone to know from what poverty I brought her home."

"Would you like to see her?" asked Mrs. Fane, gravely. "Shall we hear your other conditions first?"

"I will see her certainly; but perhaps you can tell me—has she a lover?"

"A lover!" echoed Mrs. Fane, hardly able to grasp his meaning. "Why, Gem, is a mere child!"

"She is older than her mother was when she became Mrs. Fane! Nothing would induce me to adopt Beryl as my own child if she has already engaged herself to a man I should disapprove of, and I fear she can have met no one so worthy of my heiress."

"She has never met any, worthy or unworthy," replied Mrs. Fane; "and I fancy, Lord Chesney, when once you have seen her you will understand our Gem couldn't fix her affections on anyone beneath her."

She went away to send her daughter, and Lord Chesney glanced at his cousin.

"A sensible woman, eh, Marion? She will let us have our own way."

"Perhaps for the sake of her own children she will give up Beryl to you; but I am sure she loves her dearly."

When the girl came in, looking so pale and worn in her plain black frock, Cousin Marion felt her whole heart go out to her, and even Lord Chesney was touched at her resemblance to his own lost daughter.

But he never swerved from his conditions. Would she like to come home with him, and be as his child? Would she suffer Gem Fane to die from people's minds, to make way for Beryl Chesney? Those she left behind should be well cared for. No slight or unkindness should be offered them, only Lord Chesney would have no half-measures. If she came to him it must be entirely.

To Beryl the offer gave the chance she longed for. Surely, with a new name, fresh surroundings, and widely different circumstances—surely with these she must forget? And, alas! her love-story had turned out so terrible a mistake that, still in her teens, she yet longed for nothing but oblivion. And Lord Chesney put his question.

"Had she a lover? Was there anyone she cared for, and hoped to marry by-and-by?"

"I have no lover, and I shall never marry. If you take me now, grandfather, it will be for always. I never mean to care for anyone well enough to marry him!"

It was very quickly done. A month later Mrs. Fane and her children sailed for Australia. Susan Smith came up to Brixton to see them off, and was flattered by the request she would allow the post-office to send any letters or papers that might reach the cottage on to her, that she might decide which were useless circulars, and which worthy the costly Australian postage. It was late playing into her hands again, and explained the large packet which greeted Basil Lyndon on his arrival in Sydney.

And Beryl Chesney, with a new name, a new life, a new home, should surely have been happy, in spite of her perfidious lover, and the failure of her brief romance. Alas! she was miserable.

As the days grew shorter, and the year hastened to its end, she looked like one haunted by a never-ceasing dread; and at last she replied to Cousin Marion's entreaties, as to what troubled her, by telling her of her secret marriage and its consequences.

By this time Marion Bolton had grown to love Beryl very dearly. A childless mother, her very heart yearned over the girl who had suffered so terribly, and she espoused her cause heart and soul.

Alas! Beryl's confidence had been but a half one. She could not bring herself to tell even her kind cousin of how Basil had deceived her.

Her husband was "dead" to her for all time, and so, perhaps, it was pardonable that to Mrs. Bolton she spoke of him simply as "dead!"

It was the time of the Egyptian war, and the impression conveyed to Marion was that Beryl's husband had had to join his regiment a week after their marriage, and proceed to the scene of battle, where he had quickly fallen.

The kindly creature was at a loss to understand why Beryl would not speak his name; but she readily saw how terrible a complication would be made if the poor child appealed to his family for assistance since they would resent her having kept the secret so long.

It was a tangled skein. Better, far better, that poor Beryl had told her story to Lord Chesney before she left Brixton; but the past was past.

No amount of regrets would change it, and the one thing now was to think of the future.

Mrs. Bolton told Lord Chesney that Beryl would never stand the coldness of the early spring in Essex, and that she thought three months' absence would restore her health.

The old man, who loved his grandchild dearly, consented that his cousin should take her abroad, and provided liberally for their expenses; but though they went to Cannes, on leaving The Towers, they soon returned to England, and it was in London that Beryl's little girl, the child Basil would never see or own, first saw the light.

Margaret Arnold nursed the young mother tenderly and devotedly through a long illness that followed, believing firmly that she was Mrs. Bolton, and her cousin and protectress Miss Chesney.

Perhaps the nurse, whose own marriage had been such a failure, guessed there was something strange about the baby's father, and that some other cause than death made his name a forbidden word, but she never betrayed her thoughts. She pitied poor "Mrs. Bolton" extremely, and when the proposal was made could she take charge of the little girl, treating it and representing it as her own child, she agreed.

She received fifty pounds a year, far more than she would have asked; but then the baby's presence would prevent her going out nursing, and the child was to be reared with the best and faintest care. Poor Beryl Chesney would have gone in sackcloth that her baby might wear the faintest lace and cambric. Never had she so rejoiced in her grandfather's generous allowance as now.

The time went on. The ladies had to return

to The Towers, and Lord Chesney was quite satisfied with the state of his darling's health. Beryl was more beautiful now than ever, and there was a softened radiance about her beauty which won all hearts.

Basil's child had worked the change. The baby might never be the heiress of the Lyndons. She might never be acknowledged by the Chesneys, but she was the daughter of a marriage of two loving hearts, who exchanged their vows in God's House before His priest.

In her present softened mood Beryl's opinion of her husband had changed. She believed he honestly meant to make her his wife. It was only when his father pointed out to him the flaw in the ceremony, and threatened to leave him penniless if he renewed it, that he deserted her.

"He was weak, but he loved me once," thought the poor girl. "I am sure he believed in our marriage then as much as I did; but when his father told him it was not binding, and urged on him to free himself from a wife so much beneath him, he yielded to the temptation. I wonder if he has been happy," thought the poor child sorrowfully sometimes, "and if he has forgotten me? Mrs. Smith said he meant to bring home a bride from the Bush. She will be his wife and Lady Lyndon, and yet I feel that while I live he can never really belong to anyone else. Men are different from women, I suppose, for I would rather give up life itself than marry anyone else while Basil lives."

And alas! poor child, in the next three years that was her great difficulty. It had been easy to keep her secret from Lord Chesney. It was easy to invent excuses for visiting Mrs. Arnold, "a lady who had been very kind to her in her illness" at Glenfriars, but it was impossible, simply impossible, to make Lord Chesney understand she did not wish to marry.

And here even Mrs. Bolton did not quite side with her. When it grew to be two years from her fatal wedding-day, and nearly as long since she had "lost" her husband, the good creature would hint that Beryl was too young to condemn herself to an eternal widowhood, and that no man worthy of her love would think less of her because she had already been for one brief week a wife.

"You forget," said the girl, hoarsely, "you forget 'Birdie.' Her very existence forbids such a thought."

"My dear, a kind stepfather would be the best guardian of the little one; and no one who loved you could be harsh to Birdie since she is your image."

But Beryl only shook her head, and was not convinced; and when it became evident that Philip Arnsion was the husband Lord Chesney had selected for her Marion Bolton ceased to remonstrate.

She was not clever, but she had a good woman's instinctive shrinking from evil. Before ever Beryl had come to The Towers the housekeeper felt that Mr. Arnsion was a bad man.

So things had gone on, waiting, one would say, for something to happen, some spark to ignite the gunpowder of this domestic tragedy, and warm it into an explosion.

But Beryl Chesney had suffered too terribly to be easily taken off her guard. When she entered the railway carriage at Garby, and saw her husband lying in a deep stupor almost like death, she yet kept her secret. Later on, she stood by his improvised couch in the railway room and looked on his still, set features without ever betraying what he was to her.

It struck her as a terrible complication that Basil should be taken to Glenfriars, but she never grasped the fact that he was actually at Mrs. Arnold's, beneath the same roof as his own child.

The thought of a meeting between these two never once occurred to her; and now her grandfather was dead she mourned him much and truly, but his death brought her a strange relief.

She would still keep her miserable secret,

at all hazards, if possible. But if the worst happened, and the truth was known, there was no one now to whom it would mean bitter grief or anguish.

Marion Bolton lived in her affections, and would not be estranged from Beryl by any shadow of disgrace. The Fanes, far-off in Australia, would never even hear the story.

Lord Chesney was dead. Doubtless Mr. Arnsion was his heir, and The Towers would be Beryl's home no longer; but Mrs. Bolton was provided for, and what she had she would share with Birdie and her mother.

And still on and on the train bore poor broken-hearted Beryl, on through the fair midland counties in the brightness of the September afternoon, until about five o'clock it steamed slowly into the station at Garby junction, and to her horror and dismay Philip Arnsion advanced to hand her from the carriage.

CHAPTER XVI.

LADY LYNDON reproved her eldest daughter rather sharply when she returned from her stolen expedition to Garby Wood. A simple, kind-hearted woman by nature, it had come home to her gradually during the last few months that she did not understand her first-born.

Try as she would she could not see things with Paulina's eyes; there was no sympathy between them.

Apart from the question of Mr. Arnsion's attentions, Paulina was always crossing her mother's wishes. She had joined the little party at Glenfriars unasked and unwanted, but now she was there she was no help or assistance.

She openly slighted her half-brother, while she treated Dr. Campbell with a veiled insolence which would have disgusted him but for his great interest in her relations, which made him bear even the beauty's airs and graces with tolerance.

It was so preposterous, if you thought of it, the portionless younger child of a baronet persisting in treating a man her equal by birth, and far her superior in education and manners, as an inferior.

John knew perfectly that when he "settled" in London, and it was known he had inherited the whole of his poor wife's fortune, he should be one of the pet eligibles of the season; and yet here was pretty, penniless Paulina Lyndon snubbing him at every turn in her desperate efforts to keep him in his place.

"I am afraid your sister will never like me," he said, later that same day, when he and Jessy were alone in the sitting-room.

Paulina had flounced off in a tantrum, Lady Lyndon was sitting with her son, and Mrs. Arnold had gone for a walk, intending to call in at the station-master's house and see her children.

"I can't think what has come to her," said Jessy, in a puzzled voice; "she used to be so nice and sweet. When I went back to school at Easter I thought Paulina the dearest girl in the world, but since I came home this time everything has been wrong. Perhaps she is put out at leaving London!"

"I think she is annoyed at your brother's return," suggested Campbell, candidly.

"Oh, no! it could not be that; besides, Basil must be proud of Lina, she is so pretty. I should think his coming home would make things much gay for her. You know, mamma never went into society. Lina has never even been to a party; now very likely she will 'come out.'"

"And you?"

"Oh, no," and Jessy gave a little sigh. "I shan't 'come out' in that way at all. You see, there are such a lot of us, Dr. Campbell, and Basil is only our half-brother, he couldn't be expected to keep us all. If he takes care of mamma, Paulina, and the children, we middle ones must earn our own living!"

Jack very nearly laughed, much as he admired the brave, independent spirit.

"How many 'middle ones' are there?"

"Three. We think I can begin at Christmas; but Blanche will have to stay at school nearly three years longer. I should have talked to mother and got her to consent before now but for Basil's accident."

"Have you any idea what sort of a situation you should like, Miss Jessy?"

"Anything I can do. Only Paulina is so sensitive, I am afraid she would cut me altogether if it was anything not genteel."

"I should like to choose the situation," said Campbell, cheerfully, "but I am afraid Miss Lyndon would not approve of my selection—would she?"

"I don't know. Paulina always says I shall never be a credit to her because I am so plain!"

Jack had honestly meant to speak to Basil or Lady Lyndon first. He was conscious, too, that a pair of acknowledged lovers would somewhat increase the complications at The Cottage; but this last speech broke down his prudence. He took the girl's hand in his and said, simply,—

"I love you dearly, Jessy! Do you think you could forget the difference in our ages and forgive me for being a widower? Dear, if you will only try to care for me I am sure I can make you happy as my wife!"

"Me!" exclaimed Jessy, ungrammatically. "Oh! Dr. Campbell, you must mean Lina! Everyone says she is sure to marry early, and I am going to be the old maid of the family!"

"Have you promised to fill that post?" asked Jack, rather comically, "because if not I hope you will think again before you make me miserable. Couldn't you learn to love me, Jessy, if I waited patiently. We haven't known each other very long, dear; but we have been thrown together here so intimately I feel as though I knew you better really than if we had been meeting for years and years just as mere acquaintances."

"You are just like an old friend," said the girl gently; "but I—you don't understand. I am not bright, or clever, or even pretty. I am only Jessy, and—"

"And it is Jessy I want, sweetheart," said Dr. Campbell, tenderly. "I think your mother likes me, and I am sure Basil will be on my side, if only you will give me the least little encouragement."

They were silent. She did not draw away the hand he had taken; but she spoke no word. He was growing anxious.

"Don't you like me, Jessy—just a little?"

"More than a little," she confessed shyly.

"And, Dr. Campbell?"

"What is it, Jessy?"

"When Paulina came, I thought you would be sure to fall in love with her. She is so beautiful, you know; and it made me miserable!"

"Do you know what that proves, little girl? That you do care for me. May I speak to Lady Lyndon to-night?"

"If you wish it. But, oh! I know she will be very angry with me!"

"My dear, little girl, why?"

"Because she hoped you would care for Paulina. I heard her tell Basil so when I was in his room."

"And what did he say?"

"He smiled, and then said sadly, 'Don't fret if your wishes fail, mother; so many love affairs go astray that it's safer never to plan any.'"

"I fancy his own have gone astray, poor fellow," said Jack, very gravely. "Well, Jessy, I am quite ready to brave Lady Lyndon's displeasure; and I shall speak to her the first chance I get."

The chance came then, for Lady Lyndon entered, with rather a troubled look on her calm face.

"I thought Paulina was here! Where your sister, Jessy?"

"In her own room, mamma. I expect she went upstairs when you did."

"I knocked at the door as I passed, and she did not answer. You had better go up to her, Jessy; she may have a headache."

Jessy sped away, not sorry for the excuse offered her. Her mother and John Campbell were left alone.

"Will you give your child to me?" he asked her, coming straight to the point in his frank, manly fashion. "I will cherish Jessy with my heart's best love, if only you will consent for her to be my wife."

"Your wife! That child!" exclaimed the mother in amazement. "Why, Jessy is barely seventeen!"

"Please don't think me impertinent?" he pleaded, "if I remind you there was as much disparity of age between yourself and her father, and yet I have heard Sir Paul's second marriage was a very happy one. Like him, I am a widower, but I am childless. I do not ask you to let Jessy become a stepmother."

Lady Lyndon smiled.

"I like you better than any young man I know," she said kindly, "and Basil owes you a debt of gratitude nothing can repay. If you really love my child, and can win her affection, I will give her to you gladly; but I hope you know that Jessy is portionless. For five long years we have all been dependent on Basil's charity."

"I am sure he never thought it 'charity,'" replied Jack; "and I am glad Jessy has no fortune. My means are ample, and when once I commence practising in London they will probably increase. As it is, I can make any settlements on Jessy you and Sir Basil desire."

A lump came into the mother's throat.

"I am afraid we have never valued her enough, poor little thing! You see, she was a plain, awkward child, and I always leant on Paulina."

"I understand," said Dr. Campbell, very, very gravely; "but, believe me, Lady Lyndon, it never answers to exalt one sister over the other. I fear you have a grievous disappointment before you in the shape of your eldest child."

The mother's love was on the defensive at once.

"You have hardly seen Paulina to advantage, Dr. Campbell. She is prejudiced against Basil; and I grant her manner to you has troubled me very much."

"I should never speak of that," returned John; "and, indeed, Lady Lyndon, I doubt if I am doing well to say even this much, but I want to prepare you for a trouble that may be coming! I fear your daughter is very much out of health."

"Paulina!" said the mother in frank incredulity. "Why, she never ailed anything in her life. She enjoys splendid health!"

Jack shook his head.

"I am a physician, and I do not speak without careful observation. Miss Lyndon may have enjoyed the most perfect health till now, but at present I am certain there is something gravely wrong with her!"

"Dr. Campbell!" cried the widow in an agony of remorse, "forgive my contradicting you, and tell me what is in your mind? You cannot mean my darling is going into a decline?"

"No. The ailment is mental, and on the nerves. Tell me, have you noticed no change in your daughter of late. Was she always as she is now?"

"She used to be a sweet-tempered high-spirited girl, but she has never been quite the same since she heard of Sir Basil's return. She had fancied till then that the estate and other property were mine!"

"And from that moment she has exhibited a morose, sullen, dislike for her half-brother, and everyone connected with him? Am I right?"

"Yes; but—"

"And you have grieved over the change in her, never guessing it came from her health?"

Her whole nervous system is out of order. I should not be surprised to find she suffered constantly from sleeplessness. Look at her eyes when she comes down to breakfast! They have a wistful, hunted expression sometimes, like that of some poor pursued animal. At others they look weary with long sleeplessness. Lady Lyndon, bear with me. I am Basil's friend; I hope someday to be your son. I only speak to try and warn you in time. Paulina is not herself. She is under the influence of some evil mind, constantly planning and suggesting things from which her own pure spirit shrinks. Mesmerism and hypnotism may have worked marvellous cures, but they are dangerous weapons in the hands of an unscrupulous person. Can you tell me if either of these so-called gifts have been practised on your child?"

"Never to my knowledge."

"There is no one in all your circle of acquaintance who may have used these spells to make Paulina entirely captive to his will and pleasure? I am speaking with cruel plainness, Lady Lyndon; but is there anyone, who, with professions of love, has stolen her heart, and then made her his helpless tool in evil work?"

While as a sheet was poor Barbara Lyndon. Her lips were open to speak. In another moment she would have told Dr. Campbell the whole story of their acquaintance with Philip Arnsion, when the door opened abruptly, and Mrs. Arnold rushed in, her eyes raised to Jack's in passionate entreaty.

"Oh, Dr. Campbell! Sir, you are a good man! Help me! They have stolen my child!"

"Not Birdie!" exclaimed John Campbell, "not Birdie. Why I saw her only this morning looking the picture of happiness."

"My sister had just put her to bed, and gone back to the parlour, where her husband was waiting for her. Kate says she had not been away half-an-hour when I came in, and she took me to see the child. Birdie's cot was empty. We thought she had heard my voice and come in search of me, but the door was shut, and it would have been impossible for that baby to open it."

"She must be in the room," said Lady Lyndon, hastily; "hiding, perhaps, for fun!"

Margaret shook her head.

"She was too small for tricks like that. No, my lady; Kate and her husband think she has been stolen. The window was wide open, though Kate had left it closed. She was such a pretty child; and, oh! how can I find her?"

(To be continued.)

ALETHEA'S ORDEAL.

CHAPTER XIV.—(continued.)

"HATE her!" the Marquis repeated, in a hollow tone, as if communing with himself. "Hate her! oh, Heaven!"

Looking into his lordship's face, Richard Layne noticed that it was convulsed with grief and anguish; but even while he looked it hardened, and stony eyes glared fiercely upon him.

"It is well that she fears me!" said his lordship, more calmly. "It is well that her soul can be moved to any emotion. I intend to wring her heart to the very core before I relieve her of my presence. I intend to be to her an incarnate Nemesis, and my revenge shall strike her in her weakest points!"

"Have you no pity for her?"

"None! But you do not ask how I shall wound her! An arrow to find her heart must be aimed at her son or at you. It is not my design to war first upon the innocent and helpless, but upon you!"

"Very well!" responded Richard, calmly, drawing himself up to his full height. "I do not seek a quarrel with you, my lord, and I

would not have your blood upon my hands. Yet I am capable of defending myself, and of protecting the helpless ones who look to me for aid and comfort!"

"If you can defend yourself do so now! Here are pistols. Choose one for yourself. We are far enough from the Castle to remain unheard by its occupants!"

His lordship drew from his pocket a small ornamented case, which, on being opened, was found to contain a neat pair of pistols, of the best brand and workmanship. He extended the case to Layne, who took it with reluctance, saying—

"I have no wish to fight with you, my lord. Your death is not necessary to my happiness—"

"But yours is to mine!" interrupted his lordship, angrily, interpreting the speech wrongly. "For years I have cherished a desire to see you bite the dust, and at last my desire stands a chance of gratification. You cannot evade me now. You or I must fall!"

Richard made no farther appeals to his lordship, but selected one of the pistols and handed back the other.

"Stand off twenty paces," said the Marquis, throwing aside his pistol-case and handling the weapon. "Oh, stay where you are, and I will measure the distance!"

Layne made no objection, and the Marquis paced twenty steps and then turned on his heel.

"I will count four," he said, "and we will then fire in concert. The survivor can make what explanation he pleases!"

Richard bowed quietly, knowing that Miss Alethea would have no need of words to tell her why he fell—if such should be his fate.

"One—two—three—four!" counted the Marquis, slowly and solemnly, the rage leaving his tones.

As the last word was numbered the pistols were fired simultaneously.

The noise of the shots was succeeded by a low moan, and Richard Layne fell forward on his face.

The Marquis was unhurt.

His lordship looked at his fallen foe for an instant, as if fearing to approach him, but then came forward, calling upon his name.

"Speak to me, Richard," he said, bending over him. "Are you hurt?"

He was unanswared.

Standing erect, the Marquis folded his arms and looked down upon the form of the man he had so hated, but his expression was not that of triumph or exaltation.

Years before, fair-haired, blue-eyed Richard Layne had been his bosom friend, beloved above all other men, and to that far-off period the Marquis's thoughts reverted at that moment.

"Richard!" he said again, and his voice was full of pain and grief, "you are not dead!"

He paused, as Layne stirred and attempted to rise.

Seeing that his combatant yet lived, the Marquis grew stern and fierce, and listened quietly as Richard said,—

"I believe I was momentarily stunned. I feel better!"

"Well enough to finish the combat?" asked his lordship, picking up Layne's pistol.

"My arm is hurt! Some other time, my lord!"

"Very good. I shall hold you to your promise!" declared Lord Waldemere, coldly. "We will settle our difficulties with the pistol, as soon as your arm shall be well again. You can find your way home alone, I daresay!"

He bowed and withdrew from the glade, taking his pistol-case with him, and dashing into the thicket of the park, instead of proceeding towards the Castle.

Richard then lifted himself to an upright position, sitting upon the green sward, and proceeded to examine the wound he had received.

It was evidently nothing very serious, yet the blood was streaming through the bullet-

hole in his sleeve, and he felt weak and faint, as much, perhaps, from excitement as from loss of the vital fluid.

He had walked over to the Castle park, his estate being the neighbouring one, and he desired to walk home again, not wishing to alarm Miss Wycherly or her guests.

With this intention, he attempted to struggle to his feet, but his muscles failed him, and he sank back upon the ground in a state of unconsciousness, the moonlight streaming upon his white face, and giving it a ghastly and deathly appearance!

CHAPTER XV.

It is jealousy's peculiar nature To swell small things to great; nay, out of naught To conjure much; and then to lose its reason Amid the hideous phantoms it has formed.

—*Young's Revenge.*

RICHARD LAYNE had been but a few moments unconscious when a new figure appeared upon the scene, in the form of Lady Ellen Haigh.

The pretty young widow had been gazing at the moon from the shelter of the pillared portico, and murmuring scraps of appropriate poetry, when she had been disturbed by the sound of pistol-shots from the direction of the circular glade.

Her first thought was of poachers; her second of a possible accident to some one of the gentlemen visiting at the Castle. Not wishing to needlessly alarm the gay occupants of the drawing-room, and being of an adventurous disposition, she resolved to visit the glade in person and unattended.

As soon as she had formed this resolution she quitted the portico, and hastened towards the fountain-glade.

The first object that met her gaze, as she paused on the edge of the little dell, was the form of Richard Layne.

She did not recognise him at first, and hesitated whether to advance or retreat, or to summon assistance; but the reflection that, whoever he might be, he was a human being in extremity, nerved her to approach, with words of inquiry upon her lips.

As she came timidly nearer, she recognised the frank, boyish-looking face, and cried,—

"Oh, Mr. Layne, is it you? Are you ill?"

Receiving no answer, she ran to the fountain, scooped up with her hands some water from the basin, and, returning with it, bathed the face of the fallen man, calling again upon his name.

"Can he have merely fainted?" she ejaculated, continuing her efforts. "Or is he a victim to those pistol-shots? Oh—"

She started, her fingers having come in contact with a tiny pool of blood, which had dripped from Richard's arm.

Lady Ellen had a horror of wounds and blood; but, with a calmness and self-possession that did her infinite credit, she gently lifted the injured arm to ascertain the nature and extent of the hurt it had received.

"He has been shot!" she murmured in tones of mingled horror and pity. "Who could have had the heart to injure him? I should think he could not have an enemy in the world? It must have been accidental!"

Without wasting further time in speculations, the young widow bound her cambric handkerchief over the wound to staunch the flow of blood, and devoted to the same purpose the silken sash that encircled her waist.

When she had finished the task she looked up, encountering the conscious gaze of the wounded man.

How long he had been observing her she did not know.

With a blush and a pitying glance she arose from her kneeling position, saying, confusedly,—

"I heard shots in this direction, Mr. Layne, and came here to find out their cause. I was astonished to discover you, and in your pre-

sent condition, and—and have been assisting your recovery."

Richard gave her a grateful look, and answered,—

"A thousand thanks for your kindness and presence of mind, dear Lady Ellen. My accident is not serious, I think!"

"Then it was an accident? I was sure no one could have deliberately fired upon you."

She paused, blushing again, more decidedly than before, and Richard wondered that he had not before noticed how charming and pretty she was.

He struggled to a sitting posture, but the exertion was so painful that the young widow sprang forward to assist him, expressing her sorrow at the "accident" that had befallen him, and begging him to command her services.

"Shall I summon someone from the Castle?" she asked, anxiously. "Your wound needs prompt attention."

"Not yet! It is doing well enough, and I do not wish to alarm anyone. I walked over from my place, but my accident prevents my paying my respects to the Castle guests. I daresay I only need a few minutes of rest and quiet to feel myself again!"

This remark produced its intended effect, Lady Ellen lingering at Richard's side.

The young widow looked unusually charming in her pretty violet dress, with the halo of moonlight upon her gentle, pitying face, and her patient regarded her with open admiration and gratitude.

"I am afraid that your wound is not doing well at all," said Lady Ellen, after an embarrassed pause. "See the bandage is stained with blood. And you are growing paler."

"Your ladyship is right. The wound may be more serious than I thought. It will be impossible for me to walk home, and I do not wish to alarm anyone. I wish I could send word to Alison Murray—Miss Wycherly's waiting-woman. She is an excellent nurse, I have heard, and could bind up my wound in a few minutes!"

"I will go for her, Mr. Layne. Do not leave the glade in my absence, and I will guarantee that no one but Alison—is that her name?—shall know of your injury. You shall see how well I shall keep the secret of your injury."

With this assumed lightness of speech Lady Ellen flitted from the dell, and hastened to the Castle.

She gained the eastern tower unobserved, her friends being all pleasantly engaged in the drawing-room, and knocked at the door of the ante-chamber for admittance.

Miss Wycherly answered the summons.

She looked surprised at beholding the guest in that quarter of the Castle, and Lady Ellen coloured guiltily before her cold gaze, and stammered a request to see her maid.

"Mrs. Murray?"

The visitor assented.

Miss Alethea touched a bell-pull that communicated with the inner chamber, and Alison made her appearance.

Lady Ellen found it impossible to request the waiting-woman to grant her a private interview, and she decided to state her business to both mistress and maid, which she did in as few words as possible.

"Richard—Mr. Layne injured!" exclaimed Miss Alethea, in agitated tones. "How did it happen?"

"He shot himself, I believe, Miss Wycherly. He is waiting for your maid. A little delay may endanger him!"

"There shall be none!" was the reply, and Miss Alethea gave prompt orders to Alison to follow her immediately with all necessary appliances.

She then conducted Lady Ellen from the tower.

As they passed through the wide hall at the foot of the grand staircase they encountered Lord Templecombe, who declared he had been searching everywhere for the young widow,

who was in great request in the drawing-room.

Yielding to her fate, Lady Ellen accepted his lordship's escort thither, and Miss Wycherly proceeded alone to the glade.

Richard was sitting on the bench as she came near, and welcomed her with a faint smile.

"I knew you would come, Alethea," he said, leaning his head against her shoulder "although I thought best to send the message to Alison. Will Lady Ellen return?"

"No, Richard; she is engaged in the drawing-room!"

"It is as well perhaps!" he sighed.

Miss Wycherly answered only by a searching look, under which Richard seemed conscious and confused.

She then gently undid the bandages upon his arm, and scrutinised the wound, handling it so gently and tenderly that her touch afforded him relief and comfort.

While she was thus engaged Alison entered the dell with a small basket in her hand, which she brought to her mistress.

The basket contained a supply of old linen, a bottle filled with a dark liquid, and a ball of ribbon.

With the aid of these stores Miss Wycherly staunches the blood that still flowed, although sluggishly, and bound up the wound with surgeon-like skill.

"It will do well now, Richard," she said, when she had quite finished. "You must keep quiet, and you will have nothing to fear!"

Alison proceeded to restore the contents of her basket to order, and then withdrew to a little distance.

Miss Wycherly then said, very gravely,— "Richard, this wound of yours is not the result of an accident. How did it occur?"

"Do not ask me!"

"You and the Marquis have met then, Richard?" and there was a wail of anguish in Miss Alethea's voice.

"Hush, dear. The meeting was not of my seeking. I could not refuse him, Alethea, when he forced the combat upon me. But my hurt is very slight—"

"But the Marquis! Was he hurt?" cried Miss Alethea, in tones that were barely audible.

Richard noticed that her countenance was ghastly in its pallor, and that her eyes glittered strangely.

"How you hate him, Alethea," he said. "No, he is not hurt!"

Miss Wycherly uttered a cry so sharp, although low, that it seemed to come from her very soul. What emotion it evoked Layne could not determine, but he thought it an expression of disappointment at the escape of Lord Waldemere.

Low as was the cry it reached the hearing of the Marquis, who had been wearing out his excitement by violent exertion, and who had started to return to the Castle.

It had the effect to draw him towards the glade.

His eyes blazed fiercely as they beheld his late opponent leaning against Miss Wycherly, but his demeanour was almost stony in its impassiveness.

"You are not angry with me, Alethea, because I let the Marquis escape me?" asked Richard, acting upon the impression he had received. "His lordship declared we shall have another meeting, as soon as I shall have recovered from this. Then, if it be your will, I will do my best to wound him. To tell you the truth, I fired wide of the mark to-night. Another time—"

"You must not meet him again, Richard! Promise me you will not! If you would not make me perfectly miserable, promise me to avoid his lordship in future!"

"But if he thrusts a meeting upon me I cannot act a coward!"

"For my sake, refuse to meet him, Richard. For little Arthur's sake, avoid him! Will you not promise?"

Richard could not resist Miss Alethea's

eager pleadings, and gave the required promise.

As she poured forth her grateful thanks, with tears of relief, the Marquis nervously handled his pistols, as if tempted to shoot the couple where they stood.

It was but a momentary temptation. Whatever his faults, his lordship was not an assassin, and he almost recoiled from himself at the thought he had entertained, whispering, with strong emotion,—

"She is making a demon of me! This—this hatred of Alethea Wycherly is eating away all the good in my nature. I am become so base that I am afraid of myself—yet, compared to her, I am an angel of light!"

This latter reflection restored his calmness, and lessened his self-condemnation.

Having secured the pledge she sought from Richard, Miss Wycherly proposed that he should accompany her to the Castle, adding,—

"You shall see no one but Alison and me. You need a strengthening draught, Richard. Besides, you will need to be driven home. You are quite unfit to walk!"

Layne yielded to Miss Alethea's solicitation, and Alison was sent on in advance.

As the wounded man arose to his feet he observed the stained handkerchief of Lady Ellen on the ground where it had fallen. With a shy glance at his friend he stooped and picked it up, thrusting it into his bosom.

As he withdrew his hand he noticed that Miss Wycherly had observed his movement, and she exchanged glances with him.

"Come, Richard," she said, pleasantly. "Will you lean upon my arm, or can you walk alone?"

"I can go very well alone, thank you. I shall leave you behind, I fear!"

He walked away at a very good pace, which soon slackened, however, but he did not find it necessary to accept the proffered assistance as they proceeded towards the Castle.

Lord Waldemere stole after them to the edge of the park, and watched them as they made a circuit, their final destination being the eastern tower.

They reached it unseen, found the door of the morning-room unlocked, as just left by Alison, and entered it, closing the door behind them.

The waiting woman had already closed the shutters, and now lighted the hanging lamp, and drew the curtains, giving a home-like air to the apartment. This done she withdrew, disappearing by the private staircase to the upper chambers.

"Is Arthur quite happy here?" asked Layne, when he found himself alone with Miss Wycherly. "Had I not better take him home with me to night, Alethea? This promise I have given you ties my hands towards Lord Waldemere, and it might be better for me to leave the neighbourhood for a while! My presence here only serves to irritate the Marquis!"

"I cannot lose Arthur so soon!"

"Then I must stay to protect you and him! Is there not some way by which we can compel the absence of his lordship?"

"None whatever!" replied Alethea, hastily.

"Your enmity towards each other is too bitter to admit of this continual conflict and intercourse. So long as you are obliged to act the part of hostess to the Marquis you will be unhappy. I think he is determined to utterly crush you."

"And I am equally determined not to be crushed. Take care of yourself, Richard, and I will have no fears for my future or for Arthur's!"

"There's one consolation, Alethea—a soul like Lord Waldemere's is a consuming fire. It wears his body like a sword wears the scabbard, and unless he has some peace and rest he will not live many years! With his death your life will begin!"

Alethea shivered painfully, and moaned,—

"Don't! You hurt me, Richard! Do not talk so!"

"You fear my prophecy is too good to be

true? Hope for the best, dear. Dark as has been your lot, you have secret compensation in your son. He will yet do you honour!"

At this juncture Alison returned, bearing a massive salver laden with decanters, etc., and Miss Wycherly prepared a tempting draught for Richard.

When he had drained it the woman retired, and he said,—

"I feel quite well enough to walk home, and I prefer to do so. I will go now, and return to-morrow to call, as if nothing had occurred. Lady Ellen may be anxious about me."

"I will relieve her anxiety to-night, Richard, and she will see you in person to-morrow!"

Richard bent over Miss Alethea, kissing her on her forehead, as a brother might have done; and then, after pressing her hand, took his departure, his hostess standing in the door, and looking after him until he had disappeared in the shadow beyond the lawn.

Then, after locking the door, she ascended the private stairs, passed through her rooms, and proceeded through the various corridors, and by the grand staircase to the drawing-room.

The young people were engaged in an animated discussion, upon which Mrs Braithwaite was looking with benevolent interest, and Miss Alethea joined her, learning that tableaux was the subject under consideration.

As hostess, she gave a gracious assent to the demands made upon her, and made various valuable suggestions that convinced her guests that she would be an invaluable acquisition in their proposed amusement.

"You would make a very effective picture, Miss Wycherly!" said Sir Wilton Werner, contemplating her royal beauty with admiration. "If I might suggest the character of Cleopatra, or one of those magnificent Eastern queens—"

"Or Lucrezia Borgia," said the voice of Lord Waldemere, his lordship entering in time to hear the Baronet's remark. "They say the Borgia was marvellously beautiful, as fair as she was cruel!"

The manner of the Marquis was unusually pleasant, and his remark was taken, therefore, for a suggestion made in good faith. It was regarded as valuable by one or two members of the company, but the others inclined to represent personages with less of horrible interest attaching to them.

"I must decline the character your lordship offers me," said Miss Alethea, graciously. "My taste inclines me to the representation of such characters suggested by Sir Wilton. I must give the subject more consideration before I promise to contribute my services in the way you desire!"

She refused to commit herself by a promise, even when Lady Ellen Haigh came up to her with special pleading. But she seized the opportunity thus presented to assure the young widow of the well-being of Richard Layne, and that he would call upon the morrow to express his thanks in person.

The heightened colour of Lady Ellen showed that the pity she had conceived for Richard in his wounded state might deepen to a more than friendly interest during his recovery.

It is doubtful if Miss Wycherly gave a thought to such a result from the romantic meeting in the glade between the young widow and Layne; but if she did there was not the faintest sign of consciousness in her manner.

The evening wore on, the party separated, going to their various rooms, until the hostess, her niece, and Basil Montmaur were left alone.

The lover of Lady Leopolda hastened to give her the most convincing proof of his faith and trust in her by declaring to Miss Wycherly his love for her niece, and entreating her to sanction their engagement.

"You have my full approval, Basil and Leopolda," said Miss Alethea, joining their hands, and clasping both with her own. "I

pray you may both be as happy as you deserve. It is not necessary for me to say more!"

If Basil thought Miss Wycherly's manner of sanctioning the engagement very cold, the fault was amply redeemed in his sight when she drew her niece to her bosom and kissed her as an elder and loving sister might have done on yielding up a cherished and petted being, and then placed her in his embrace.

"Be tender with her, Basil," she said.

"I will! I will!" cried the lover, earnestly.

Miss Wycherly smiled sorrowfully, but the smile fled quickly, and she was her old haughty self again.

She dismissed Basil, and departed with Lady Leopolda, escorting the latter to her door, and then proceeded to her own tower.

In the corridor without she met Lord Waldemere, who was walking uneasily back and forth.

"You have lost your way, my lord," she said, haughtily. "Shall I summon a servant to show you your chamber, upon the floor above?"

"Has that man gone home, Alethea?" cried the Marquis, fiercely, ignoring her remark.

"He has, my lord!"

"I did not see him emerge from the tower!" said his lordship, doubtfully.

"Because you failed for one moment in your espionage, my lord," returned Miss Wycherly, scornfully.

Turning from him, she knocked at her room, and Alison admitted her, shutting the door in the Marquis's face.

Wondering why it was necessary for her to go through with those preliminaries before gaining admittance to her own apartments, Lord Waldemere slowly took his way to his chamber, by no means at peace with his soul.

That night, as he slept uneasily, acting over in dreams his late encounter with Richard Layne, he felt, as once before, an arm around him, a soft cheek laid to his, and a tender mouth pressed closely to his own.

By a powerful effort he aroused himself, but he was the only occupant of his chamber. His doors were locked as he had left them, and there was no trace of an intruder.

"It must have been a dream!" he reasoned.

Yet the memory of that kiss lingered with him throughout the night, and its dewy freshness thrilled him to his inmost soul.

CHAPTER XVI.

Though all the world should crack their duty to you,

And throw it from their soul; though perils did abound, as thick as thought could make them, and appear in forms more horrid; yet my duty,

As doth a rock against some chiding flood, Should the approach of the wild river break, And stand unshaken yours.

—Henry the Eighth.

OBTAINING Miss Wycherly implicitly Natalie Atton proceeded to the spot designated, there to await the farmer, who would take her to his home. She had not long to wait, the rumbling of his wagon soon being heard. With a wildly throbbing heart she stepped farther into the road that he might not fail to see her, and awaited his coming.

As he approached he slackened his pace, regarding her seriously, and finally halted, inquiring,—

"Are you Miss Atton?"

"Yes, I am Natalie Atton," was the eager response.

"Then you are the young lady committed to my charge by Miss Wycherly! You are to go home with me, if you please!"

Natalie looked closely at the face of the schoolmaster, and felt an instinctive confidence in him, as she marked his plain, honest face, so full of intelligence and kindness.

On his part, John Perkins was greatly impressed by the quiet grace and gentle manner of the young girl; and, to show his suddenly conceived respect for her, he bowed

from his waggon and politely assisted her to a seat in the vehicle.

He started as he took his seat beside her, catching his first full view of her face, and exclaimed,—

"Lady Leopold! Is it possible—"

"You are mistaken, sir," interrupted Natalie. "I am not Lady Leopold. I am only a farmer's grand-daughter. I do not see why I should so strongly resemble her ladyship, but I have need to be thankful for it, since to that resemblance I owe Miss Wycherly's friendship!"

"A farmer's grand-daughter!" exclaimed John Perkins. "Why, you look every inch the lady!"

Natalie could not be offended at this remark, given with such genuine kindness, but she made no reply. Her reticence in regard to herself did not fail to strike the farmer, and he lapsed into silence, indulging in various theories as to her history and her resemblance to the lady of the Castle.

On first beholding her he had for one moment supposed her to be Lady Leopold, whom he had once or twice seen in her rides about the country; but he had immediately detected his mistake, and mentally reproached himself for his stupidity.

The utter improbability of Lady Leopold's having need of his protection, and seeking the seclusion of his home, did as much towards convincing him that it was not she whom he was conveying from the Castle as the assertion made by Natalie.

He did not speak again until they turned into the secluded lane that conducted to his home, and then he informed her that they were nearing their destination.

Natalie looked around her, at the overhanging branches of the trees lining the lane, at the blossoming hedges, and at the greenward over which the waggon passed almost noiselessly, and a feeling of rest came over her.

This feeling deepened as they approached the denser mass of shrubbery that concealed the cottage, and she beheld through the foliage a speck of light—the sign that they were almost home.

"Here we are!" said her protector, driving into the little clearing surrounding his cottage. "You would not have thought there was a human habitation here, would you?"

He halted, sprang out, and assisted Natalie to the ground.

The young girl had barely time to glance at the dwelling when a door was thrown open, and Mary Perkins appeared on the threshold.

She looked surprised at beholding Natalie, whom her husband hastened to introduce, but she greeted her with kindly warmth, as the farmer declared her to be a friend and protégée of Miss Wycherly, and conducted her into the house, while John took care of his horse and vehicle.

"I'm afraid, Miss Afton," said Mary, ushering her into the pleasant little sitting-room, "that you will not be contented here after seeing the Castle?"

"I was born in a plain farmhouse," answered Natalie, sinking into the sleepy hollow of an arm-chair offered her, and bestowing an appreciative look upon the homelike room. "I am not fond of grandeur!"

Mary Perkins bustled about in housewifely style, shading the lamp upon the centre table, gathering into a work-basket the little garments upon which she had been at work, and placing upon the table a large volume, which, from its worn appearance, seemed to have been frequently studied by the ex-schoolmaster.

John soon came in, but neither he nor his wife questioned the young wanderer, or betrayed any anxiety to know who she was, or why she sought the asylum of their home.

It was enough for the warm-hearted and grateful couple to know that she had been sent to them by their benefactress, and they treated her as Miss Wycherly's representative.

They addressed to her a few commonplace

yet pleasant remarks, and as she showed no desire to converse left her to her self-communion, and talked with each other.

The farmer soon took up the large, worn volume, which proved to be a Bible, and read a chapter from it. He then read a prayer, into which he introduced a petition for the health and happiness of the young lady now his guest.

Natalie was affected by the simple piety of her host and hostess, and by the consideration shown for her welfare, and her voice trembled as she asked to be shown to her room.

Mary Perkins hastened to light a bedroom candle, and conducted her upstairs to the room over Arthur's drawing room.

It was neatly furnished, and looked towards the west, the view, however, being bounded by the thick growth of the trees encircling the cottage.

To Natalie it looked a blessed haven of refuge.

"My children sleep in the room across the passage, Miss Afton," said the farmer's wife, setting the candlestick upon the white-draped toilet-table. "They will not disturb you, I hope, if they rise before you do. At what hour will you have breakfast?"

"I beg you will not change your usual routine on my account," replied Natalie. "I always rise early!"

Mary Perkins lingered a few minutes, and then withdrew, leaving the young wife to her needed repose.

Returning to the sitting-room, where her husband was still poring over his book, the farmer's wife remarked,—

"John, did you notice how very like Miss Afton is to Lady Leopold? Isn't it strange?"

"Very. The most remarkable coincidence that ever came to my knowledge!"

Mary seated herself in her little easy chair, preparing for a pleasant gossip about their mysterious guest.

"Do you know who she is, John?" she asked.

"Only that she said her grandfather was a farmer. A gentleman farmer, I suppose; although, at first, I took it differently. I fear I offended her by saying she looked like a lady. She is one. Miss Wycherly wants us to treat her with all respect, to keep her presence here a secret, and to say nothing before her of Master Arthur!"

"Then she doesn't know of his existence? I might have known she did not, but I have nearly lost my senses since Lord Waldemere came upon me so suddenly at the door. I have expected him here every minute during the day, but he has not been. He may think to question me farther, but he will find that I am not losing my power to keep secrets!"

John Perkins smiled approvingly, knowing that his wife was a woman with perfect command over her tongue, and that a secret in her keeping was the same as buried. The only person with whom the little woman ever gossiped was her husband, and he endeavoured to make up by his society the deprivation of friends and neighbours—for the occupants of the hidden cottage relinquished both when they married and settled in their pleasant home.

This renunciation was all the easier because the Castle was the nearest residence, and because the village where John Perkins formerly taught was three miles distant from his present home. An additional reason was afforded by the fact that Mary Perkins came originally from another county, and had never possessed many acquaintances in the vicinity of Wycherly Castle.

"I am glad Master Arthur is away from here," continued the good woman. "If any harm had happened to him while with us I should never have forgiven myself. Hard as it would be, I would rather harm should come to our own children than to my lady's son!"

The farmer echoed the sentiment with considerable warmth.

"I sometimes think, John, that our foster-

child is ten times dearer to us than our own little ones. I have missed him so much so-day—so much more than usual. I suppose my unusual anxiety was on account of Lord Waldemere's visit. Master Arthur is so brave, so gentle, and so chivalrous. He is as polite to Ally as if she were a born lady, and so fond of you and me, John. I dread the time when he will be removed from our care!"

"We won't anticipate trouble, Mary. All we have to do is to make Miss Afton happy, and to let her go and come at any hour, without questioning her. It is the least return we can make to my lady to honour her through Miss Afton!"

John spoke in a tone that seemed to put an end to the conversation, and his wife saw that there was nothing more to be said.

She proceeded to act in accordance with his suggestion the following morning.

The best seat at the breakfast-table was given to Natalie, and in remembrance of Miss Wycherly's tastes the ex-maid placed beside the plate of her guest a bouquet of fresh violets, the dew still upon them.

Natalie was surprised at the good taste and quiet luxury prevailing in the pleasant breakfast-room.

There were pictures on the walls—fine engravings in gilded frames—that had evidently been selected by a more cultivated and refined taste than was possessed by the inmates of the cottage. The carpet was of blue and wood colour, in a pattern of tiny arabesques, and the furniture was of a pretty, light wood.

The table was furnished with spotless linen, fine gilded china, and spoons and forks of solid silver.

Natalie was puzzled at this display of taste and wealth in the farmer's home—in such contrast, too, to the dress and appearance of the Perkins family; but the reader, more enlightened, knows that Miss Wycherly loved to surround her son with all refined things, that he might not grow up like the people with whom he was living.

The Perkins children were well behaved, but Natalie scarcely glanced at them, and they did not obtrude themselves upon her notice.

After breakfast, the young guest strolled about the lawn, and through the plantation, busy with her own thoughts, and finally walked along the green lane, tempted to wander there by the songs of birds and the sunshine that sifted through the interstices of the foliage of the arching trees.

The consciousness that she possessed the friendship of Miss Wycherly, and Lady Leopold, gave her hope for her future, and dispelled the clouds of despair in which she had been enveloped.

"If his relatives are willing to own me, grand as they are," she thought, "perhaps Elmer may be induced to retract his cruel words! I am sure he must love me yet! I am equally sure that Lady Leopold does not love him. I should be quite confident of my ultimate happiness if it were not that Elmer is an Earl—a real lord! When I think of that I despair!"

She looked upwards with an imploring expression, as if praying Heaven to avenge the heart of her husband to do her justice.

"If I could only clear my name!" she said, half aloud. "I would ask nothing further. I would be content never to see Elmer again, never to share his destiny. I would not care for the title of Countess, nor for the honour and respect it would bring me, but I want to feel that I have nothing to conceal; that I need not shrink from observation; and that my grandmother and uncle regard me with respect. Whatever his title or wealth, Elmer shall not trample upon me!"

Thus resolving, Natalie wandered along the lane, pausing now and then to pluck daisies and poppies in an idle, abstracted way, until she came to the road.

The farmer had put bars across the end of the lane since the visit of the Marquis, with a view to shutting out intruders in future, and Natalie leaned against them and looked up

and down the road with a dreamy expression on her fair face.

"I wish I could read the future!" she sighed. "If I only knew what fate had in store for me!"

Taking one of the daisies from the bunch in her hand she began to pluck the leaves, as country girls are fond of doing when they wish to tell their fortunes.

"He will own me—he won't own me!" she said, letting fall at each sentence a daisy petal. "He will—he will not!"

Idle as was the task it interested her, and she continued it until a single petal remained upon the stem—and the verdict was in the negative.

She sighed at this result of her attempt at fortune-telling, for, in her present mood, even so slight a thing had power to depress her fluctuating spirits.

She was about to repeat the experiment when she heard the sound of horse's hoofs, and an exclamation of surprise uttered in a familiar voice.

Looking up she saw Hugh Fauld!

"Why, Natalie, is it you?" cried Hugh, riding up to the bars. "I have found you, then!"

"What are you doing here, Hugh?" exclaimed Natalie, recovering from her first astonishment. "Have you been looking for me?"

"Yes, Natalie. After you went to London I returned home and made every effort to soften your relatives towards you, but failing I resolved to seek you and protect you, if you should need protection. The more I thought of it the more I became convinced that it was not right to allow a mere child, as you are, to encounter the temptations of London. As soon as I could I followed you!"

"But I do not see how you tracked me!"

"I lost sight of you in London, and it was only last evening that I thought to inquire for you at the various railway stations. By extreme good fortune I got trace of you immediately, but learned that you had taken your ticket to a place at some distance. I had the forethought to inquire of the guard at every station if he had seen a young lady of your appearance, and in that way I providentially heard of your whereabouts. I inquired at the village, and learned that such a young girl had been seen. She was particularly noticed on account of her resemblance to some great lady who lives in the neighbourhood. Then I hired a horse and set out to scour the neighbouring country, convinced that you were not in the village. Providence has guided me to you!"

As he concluded he leaped from his horse—threw the bridle over his arm, and drew closer to the young girl.

He looked as though his days and nights had been full of anxiety since her departure from home, and as though he felt an infinite joy in having found her.

"I am sorry that you thought it necessary to come in search of me, Hugh," said the young girl, putting her hand into his and quickly withdrawing it. "I am quite safe, and with friends!"

"You have found your husband?"

"I have!"

"And what does he say to you, Natalie. You surely are not with him and unowned?"

"No, Hugh. I have found other friends, of my own sex. I have placed myself in their hands, confident that they will assist me!"

"Have the new friends obscured the old?" asked Hugh Fauld, reproachfully.

"What friends had I, save yourself? My grandmother and uncle were not my friends, as you know. And even you, Hugh, felt it a condescension when you offered me marriage!"

"You wrong me, Natalie. I may have been awkward in expressing my love for you, but it was as pure and reverential as any ever given to woman. I am but a farmer—a rough fellow—but my heart is as true as if it beat beneath golden chains and rich trappings!"

"I know it. I have proved it!" replied

Natalie, dismissing the recollections that had rankled in her heart, and resolving never to mention to Hugh Fauld that Mrs. Alton had declared him willing to marry her. "Forgive me, if I have wounded you, Hugh. My grandmother embittered me against you! We will be true friends henceforth!"

"True friends!" sighed Hugh Fauld, the words being but sound to his aching, craving heart. "Oh, Natalie, when I think of what might have been—"

"Hush, Hugh!" replied the deserted young wife, with an air of becoming dignity. "You forget the gulf between us!"

"Would that I could forget it!" and Hugh turned away to hide his emotion.

After a brief silence he said,—

"You have not told me the name of your husband, Natalie. Have you discovered it?"

"Yes, Hugh!"

"What is it?"

"I cannot tell you, Hugh. He does not know that I have discovered his secret. I must talk with him before I can betray it to you!"

Hugh Fauld approved this decision, glad as he would have been to have had it reversed, and he conceived an added reverence for Natalie.

"I do not seek to obtrude myself into your confidence," he said, kindly, "but if you are willing, I should like to know how he received you!"

"I saw him but for a few minutes, Hugh, and he was too startled at seeing me to say much. He simply said that he was poor, and a younger son, and warned me to go home. He threatened me, I believe, and then quitted me abruptly!"

"And that was all? Is he poor?"

"I cannot answer you, Hugh!"

"At least, you will tell me the names of the friends with whom you are staying?"

Natalie uttered a gentle negative.

"My poor child, you know so little of the world that you may have chosen for friends people who would seek your destruction. Pardon me if I speak plainly, Natalie. All women are not true-hearted and sincere like you, and there are some of your sex who would be tempted by your beauty to lure you to ruin. Confide in me for your own sake!"

"I have promised to be silent, and I must be. Although I am not familiar with the world, Hugh, I know that the ladies who are befriending me are good and noble. Farther I cannot explain!"

"You will not even tell me where you live?"

Natalie shook her head.

"Then I must discover it for myself!" replied Hugh Fauld, firmly. "I cannot leave you with strangers, Natalie, without knowing who they are!"

The young wife was surprised at this unlooked-for defence, and responded,—

"It is enough for you to know, Hugh, that my friends are well known to my husband. I have told them my story, and they believe me. They are willing to assist me with Elmer, and I believe that their influence with him is much greater than my own. I hope for a reconciliation with my husband, to be ultimately acknowledged by him; but you know as well as I that such an event would be retarded by your presence here. Elmer is very proud, and should he think that I have betrayed the secret of our marriage, his former love for me might change to aversion. Besides," and a blush stained her delicate cheeks, "you know what Elmer wrote about you in that last letter, Hugh. After that, I would not wish him to see you with me!"

Hugh Fauld silently acquiesced in the wisdom of these remarks, even though his heart was wrung by them.

"Did my grandmother express any regret at my departure?" asked the young girl, changing the subject abruptly.

"Not any," was the frank reply. "I told her of our visit to Falconbridge, and of our unsuccessful search of the register in the church

there, and she said she should have been surprised at any other result to our investigations. She assured me that I had been imposed upon by you—but it will do no good what else she said. I do not wish to embitter you further against her. But do not think of going back to the Grange, Natalie, unless with your husband!"

"I understand you, Hugh. I have too much pride to think of ever going back!"

"I have one thing more to say, Natalie," and Hugh Fauld's tones grew winning and tender. "Should you discover that this man, whom you wedded under his assumed name, is not legally your husband, what should you do?"

He took her hand as he noticed how she shivered at his words, and held it in a reassuring clasp.

"I do not know—I will not think of such a thing!" she answered, moaningly, her blue eyes having a wild and faltered look.

"I fear that such will be the result, Natalie! In that hour of your sorrow and bitter anguish I want you to remember that my love will be an unfailing refuge to you. Do not shrink from me; I would not speak thus to you if I thought that you were legally a wife, Natalie. I want you to know that when all else forsake you, then my arms shall be open to you! I know how pure and innocent you are and have been, how spotless have been your motives, and I cannot blame you for anything you have done. Neglected as you have always been, how could you have done differently? You are and always will be honoured in my sight above all other women, and, should the worst happen, I will feel blest if you will come to me! I should like to see the person who would venture to sneer at Mrs. Hugh Fauld!"

He concluded with a flash of the eyes that boded little good to the person who should be so unkind as to speak ill of poor Natalie; and then, with an earnest pressure of her hand, he sprang into the saddle, and dashed away at full speed.

He had no intention of returning to Fauld Farm, however, although Natalie believed he would do so. He hastened back to the village inn, settled his account and delivered up his horse, and then set out for a village ten miles or more distant, which he intended making his headquarters so long as Natalie should remain in her present quarters. His future movements would be guided by hers, for he was firmly resolved that henceforth he would watch over her unseen, a presentiment haunting him that an hour would come when his hand would be needed to rescue Natalie from some awful fate.

CHAPTER XVII.

Take heed of pity: pity was the cause
Of my confusion: pity hath undone
Thousands of gentle natures in our sex.
For pity is sworn servant unto love;
And this be sure, wherever it begin
To make the way, it lets the master in.
—Daniel's "Arcadia."

The morning subsequent to the duel in the fountain-glade Lady Ellen Haigh appeared pensive, and not all the railery of her gay companions had power to bring back her wonted spirits. The cause of her pensiveness was unsuspected, save by one person, and that person was Miss Wycherly. But, whatever her suspicions, Miss Alethea bestowed unusual attention upon the young widow, who, with mingled surprise and pleasure, wondered that her haughty hostess should so unbend to her.

Lady Ellen declined riding when the horses were ordered, and lingered in the drawing-room while her friends retired to don their habits.

She was quite alone, when Richard Layne was announced.

He was pale, as might have been expected, but his cheeks flushed as he advanced and greeted the young widow, who blushed vividly and betrayed an unwonted embarrassment—

as if her thoughts had not been all of him since their last meeting, and as if she had not declined her morning ride because she expected his coming!

She inquired after his health with evident solicitude, and, on being assured that his wound was of no importance, betrayed considerable relief, as if she had feared to the contrary.

"I hope it will not heal too rapidly, Lady Ellen," said Richard, lightly, "else I shall lose all claim upon your pity and sympathy. It is pleasant to have some one solicitous about one, and it is a pleasure I have seldom enjoyed, owing to my uninterrupted and unromantic healthfulness. I must make the most of my present paleness!"

Her ladyship laughed merrily, more at the look of the visitor than at his words, and her laughter banished all constraint between them.

After thanking her for her kindness of the previous evening, Richard inquired after Miss Wycherly, Lady Leopold, and her guests.

Lady Ellen was replying to his courteous inquiries, when the sound of voices and foot-steps in the corridor announced the intended departure of the riders, and the young widow led the way to the balcony, from which place she intended to witness the mounting.

Richard followed her, and was recognized by the guests, as they came out, who urged him to accompany them, but he politely refused, his paleness being sufficient excuse.

He had already become a favourite with the visitors of the Castle, and they expressed their regret at his headache, even while they mounted their impatient steeds.

The riding party was not large, consisting of Lady Leopold and Basil Montmaur; Miss Braithwaite and Lord Templecombe; and Miss Emily Braithwaite, attended by Sir Wilton Werner.

As they waved their gay adieux to Lady Ellen and Richard Layne, and swept down the avenue, Richard remarked,—

"I do not see the Marquis of Waldemere. He was formerly very fond of riding!"

"He returned half-an-hour since from a wild dash over the hills on that half-tamed horse of his," answered Lady Ellen. "He is probably in the library. He seems very fond of solitude, and is gloomier than ever to-day. You speak of his former tastes. Is your acquaintance with him of long standing?"

"We were friends years ago, before his lordship retired to his Welsh hermitage," said Richard, hesitatingly. "We have not met for ten years, or thereabouts, until now. He is older than I am, but notwithstanding the difference in our ages we were like brothers once!"

"Then you must know him thoroughly, Mr. Layne," exclaimed the young widow. "What is this mystery that envelops him? Why is he always so gloomy and moody, as if brooding over a terrible past?"

Richard's fair face was shadowed, and he replied, evasively,—

"Your questions are difficult to answer, dear Lady Ellen. He is gloomy because he carries an unquiet heart and a soul at war with itself. He has seen much trouble!"

"But, Mr. Layne," said Lady Ellen, in a half-whisper, "did he ever do anything wrong? He seems so like the Corsair, you know!"

Richard involuntarily smiled, but soon said, gravely,—

"However his lordship may have erred and gone astray he has no stain upon his hands. Years ago," he added, reflectively, "before he was outwardly what he now is, he had the noblest heart a man ever carried in his bosom. He was generous to a fault, gentle—but I forget myself. He is changed—changed terribly—and to his inmost soul. I fear him now as much as I once loved him. Except in features he is not the same man I delighted to call my friend and brother!"

"Are you still friends?"

"We are the bitterest of enemies!"

Lady Ellen looked startled at these words

and the tone in which they were uttered, and said,—

"I would not have believed that you had an enemy in the world, Mr. Layne, or that you could hate any one. You must know the mystery that surrounds the Marquis, and perhaps you are concerned in it!"

"You are right, Lady Ellen. I know all, or nearly all, and the darkness that envelopes his lordship sometimes presses heavily upon my own heart! The secret, however, is his, not mine to reveal. Your ladyship is greatly interested in the Marquis," added Richard, with a smile.

The young widow accepted this partial change of subject, understanding that Mr. Layne did not wish to pursue the late theme further.

The glimpse he had given her of an existing secret she carefully hid in her own soul, the conversation having, in her view, taken the nature of a confidence which it would be sacrilege to impart to another.

The interest with which she had regarded the Marquis of Waldemere was partially transferred to Richard, who began to appear a hero in her eyes. His bland, boyish face and his blue eyes assumed new dignity in her sight now that she had become aware that he was a sharer in the mystery enveloping his lordship, and that the two men were deadly enemies.

"My interest in the Marquis was mostly curiosity, Mr. Layne," she said, frankly, after a thoughtful silence. "I have read so much of gloomy beings like his lordship, and he answers so exactly to descriptions I have read of romantic personages, that I was not alone in my estimate of him. But I think I will turn my curiosity in some other direction. I do not admire such dark men."

"Do you not?" exclaimed Layne, eagerly.

"You prefer fair-haired ones?"

Lady Ellen assented with a smile and a blush, and Richard seemed to take new heart from the assurance.

It was evident that the two young people were greatly impressed with each other, and that already fires had been lighted upon the altar of either heart that might burn more and more steadily, until they should grow into enduring and perpetual flames.

Their conversation was desultory, and, although they found it full of interest, a listener might have thought differently.

Miss Wycherly eventually made her appearance, and Richard greeted her so courteously that Lady Ellen experienced a faint pang of jealousy, which was not unmarked by her hostess.

A pleasant, general conversation followed Miss Alethea's entrance, and the time flew by unheeded, until at length the striking of the clock warned Mr. Layne that it was time for him to go, as he had an engagement to meet.

The hostess went with him to the door, as seemed to be her frequent custom, but soon returned to Lady Ellen, who stood in the balcony.

"He is a good rider, Miss Wycherly," said the young widow, watching Richard, as he bowed and rode away.

"His horsemanship is the least of his good qualities, dear Lady Ellen," answered the hostess. "He is the kindest, the best-hearted of men! I know him better than others do," she added, carelessly, "for we are as brother and sister. No sister could feel more affection for a brother than I feel for Richard Layne, and he could not think more of me if we had been born of the same parents!"

The young widow looked after Layne with a brighter and more hopeful glance, her heart quite set at ease by the careless declaration of Miss Alethea.

Mrs. Braithwaite entered before more could be said, and claimed the fulfilment of a promise given her by Lady Ellen of a new song.

While the young widow proceeded to fulfil it Miss Alethea glided from the apartment, going to her own rooms.

Allison Murray admitted her, and closed the door securely behind her.

Miss Wycherly addressed a few remarks to her attendant, and was then about to retire to the inner room, when young Arthur bounded into the ante-chamber.

"Oh, mamma!" he shouted, rushing up to her; "I have been waiting for you this good while. What made you stay so long?"

"Hush, my darling!" said Miss Wycherly, her proud face beaming with maternal tenderness, "some one might hear you. You should not rush into this room without knowing if I were alone. Suppose I had had some one with me?"

"Why, then I should have seen some one besides you mamma," responded the boy, with a gleeful laugh. "Why don't you bring some one else in here? Why must I be kept shut up all the while?"

"I cannot explain my reason to you yet, my dear little son, but it is very necessary for you to remain unseen. Are you getting tired of mamma, Arthur?" and Miss Wycherly's tones were full of tender reproach.

"No, indeed! You know I'm not! I'd be willing to be shut up in a cave with you for a thousand years, mamma, instead of in these pretty rooms. I wouldn't be away from you and Alison for a million pounds. But I'd like to see Papa Richard too. I peeped out of the lattice and saw him riding away, as grand as a king. Didn't he leave any message for me?"

"Yes, my darling—"

Miss Wycherly paused, as a low, but peremptory knock sounded on the door.

"Who can it be, Alison?" she whispered, with a startled air.

"I don't know, my lady. Lady Leopold hasn't come back from her ride. It can't be one of the servants—"

The knock was repeated, still more peremptorily.

"It is the Marquis, Alison!" exclaimed Alethea, growing deathly pale. "I cannot meet him with the boy. Come, Arthur—"

But young Arthur, seeing his mother's distress, would not leave the room with her. He clenched his tiny fists, assumed a resolute manner that was meant to be formidable, and exclaimed,—

"Open the door, Alison. Whoever it is he shall find I can protect my mother! Let him in!"

The young warrior's demonstrations were summarily ended, for Miss Wycherly caught him up in her arms, and abruptly retreated with him to the inner chamber, as the knocking became louder and continuous.

As soon as the door had closed behind her, her waiting woman unlocked and threw open the door opening into the corridor.

As she expected, Lord Waldemere stood before her.

Without a word he brushed past her, and looked suspiciously about the room.

"What do you want, my lord?" inquired Alison, after glancing into the corridor and shutting the door.

His lordship took no notice of this inquiry, but crossed the floor towards the inner chamber.

"That is my lady's bed-chamber!" cried the woman, indignantly, and full of fears for the safety of her mistress and Arthur. "She will never forgive your lordship's intrusion; you have no right here. Go away!"

The command was enforced by personal efforts on Alison's part, but their object paid no heed to her vigorous pullings, pursuing his course, and flinging open the door of communication between the two rooms.

The inner chamber was empty.

There was a faint fluttering of draperies, as though Miss Alethea's departure had been quite recent, but no means of escape could be discovered by her enemy.

"You see my lady is not here!" cried the waiting-woman, triumphantly. "Your lordship had better leave before she comes!"

"I was sure I heard her voice in conversa-

tion with some one, and equally sure I heard a child's voice saying, 'Papa Richard!' said the Marquis, gloomily.

"And what is it to you if you did?" demanded Alwynne, boldly.

"Nothing—nothing!" and there was a wail in the Marquis's fierce tones. "But I wanted to assure myself that Layne is here!"

"You'll have to wait some time to do that, my lord," responded Alwynne, with grim determination. "My lady don't admit gentlemen to her room, and the sooner you leave them the better! Mr. Layne went home some minutes ago, as your lordship could have seen, and as your lordship can now find out by inquiring of the footmen or the grooms. Come! I can't have you here any longer!"

His lordship turned on his heel, meekly obeying the command, rather than have a scene, and beatfully ashamed of his conduct.

Alwynne followed him to the door, ushered him into the corridor, after ascertaining that his egress would be unobserved by any passing servant, and then closed and double-locked the door after him.

"I declare his lordship's entrance did give me quite a turn," said the faithful creature, congratulating herself on the cleverness she had displayed. "My lady had just time to get away. I must go and tell her!"

Proceeding into the inner chamber, she carefully secured all the doors, as if the caution were habitual, and then advanced to the wall, as if about to contemplate the large paintings adorning it.

There were three of these paintings, and to the middle one Mrs. Murray directed her movements.

Touching a spring in the frame, the canvas sprang out of it, like a square door upon hinges, and a door in the wall was revealed. This door fitted so perfectly that its presence could not have been detected, save when, as now, it stood slightly ajar.

(To be continued.)

A GIRL'S HEART.

CHAPTER XXIII.

Tax son played on the rippling waves, and turned the sand into streaks of dull gold.

Alwynne sat leaning against an old wrecked fishing boat. She was not reading, nor even glancing at the book that, as usual, lay open on her knee. She was gazing far across the sea to where, on the distant line of the horizon, she could discern the full sails and tall masts of some giant ship, outbound for a foreign land and office.

The girl's eyes followed that far-off object, that moved so slowly as to seem to be a fixture on the mass of rolling waters. There was a quiet, subdued look on her lovely face; but the whole expression was changed from that which it had worn the day she had sat by the window, and her husband had come towards her.

Then, there had been an extraordinary expression on the girl's countenance, a sort of dreamy unconsciousness, a heaviness, a lassitude, a look as of a person who is bound and fettered, and who struggles with an enemy that is too powerful and potent to be overcome.

Now it was almost the face of the Alwynne of old. The beauty was as great, and the extreme pallor that had shadowed it was gone, being replaced by a delicate colouring of something like health in the softly, tinged cheeks.

She looked as though a burden had fallen from her shoulders, as though the mere fact of existence was in itself a pleasure, and not a weariness. She was herself again, as we first saw her on board the Atlantic steamer—herself, and yet with a subtle difference that is the close attendant on great mental suffering.

Wonderously young and fair, she was in her

white serge gown and broad-brimmed hat. The year was advanced now, and spring had given place to summer. Down here on the sands, sheltered from any wind by the high, steep cliffs to the right and left, it was quite hot. Alwynne did not object to the heat, however. She was only conscious of a pleasantness in seeing the waves sparkle, and in feeling the sea air come softly about her, moving the tendrils of her brown hair on her brow, and murmuring gently about her ears; and the laughter, and shrill, merry voices of the children in the distance, who built their castles to a phenomenal height and demolished them ruthlessly, only to build new ones, was a sort of pleasure to her also. For it spoke of life and enjoyment that was in the world, though it might not be for her individual share.

Alwynne sat watching the big ship. She wondered about it vaguely. What it might be? Where it was going? Who was aboard it? She could conjure up an intimate picture of its deck and saloons so easily. How many, many of these ships had she called her home, for days, sometimes for weeks at a time?

It seemed odd to her to scan back over the few weeks that were gone, and to realize that it had been she who had done so many things, seen so many lands, travelled so many miles. A chaos, broad and deep as the sea itself, was spread between the Alwynne of to-day, and the Alwynne of that time.

She turned from looking at the ship after awhile. A mist had come over the horizon. She could not see the white wings of the outward-bound vessel. She could see nothing for the tears that welled into her eyes.

Her thoughts were so clear and concise to-day; she did not remember when she had been able to think so distinctly as during the last two or three days. She was not certain as to what had come to her in the days just before these last; but she felt she must have been ill, and so have had her mental strength enfeebled.

Somehow, the sight of that ship was very sad to her. It brought back a banished memory. A wet deck, with dark clouds flying before the wind, the sea choppy, and a muddy green—a storm threatening in every gust, and a man standing beside, as she leaned over the rail, looking down into the depthless waters, his brown hand resting close to hers, his wondrous dark blue eyes eating through her downcast face, as it were, to her very soul itself, as she uttered the words which were farewell between them—not for a day, an hour, but for ever.

Alwynne had not gazed upon this memory for a long, long time. Things were strangely clouded in her mind; some were obliterated, others mingled in a chaotic manner. She felt unequal to the task of sorting them out, there was so much to confuse, so much to wound; but this remembrance was clear enough—it had no need of unravelling. It was stamped on her heart, and was there indelibly fixed until the end.

Thoughts followed quickly one on another. Her mother's face, haughty, pale, cold, and cruel as a mask, flitted before her; then a jumble of horrible words, then her flight from the hotel—her search for Basil, and her success there. Here she pressed her small hand over her eyes. Then so much that was strange real and yet unreal—pleasant at first, in a sense of protection and comfort, found when least expected, and with this pleasure a strong, indefinite repugnance—a fear, a shrinking from an incomprehensible desire to escape from something or somebody, and then—a muddle—a tangle of thoughts, ideas, dreams.

Alwynne sighed, and then looked round and smiled. Basil had come up and sat down beside her so quietly. She had not known he was so near till he was so close.

"How far have you read?" he asked her, looking wistfully at her loveliness, and taking her hand between his gently.

"How far have you walked?" Alwynne replied, with a question and a smile.

"I have been up to the top of the cliff!"

"Basil, how wicked you are!"

"It is not far, really, Alwynne!"

"It must be quite three miles," Alwynne said, regarding him with a most portentously, severe expression.

"Two and three-quarters," Basil corrected her, laying his cheek on her small, ungloved palm. Alwynne disengaged her hand, drew his head down on her knees, and touched his fair hair with a tender, loving caress.

"And just two miles and a half! Too much for an invalid like you, Basil!" she said. "It is so naughty of you! What do you think Janet would say if she could know how little care you have taken of yourself, and how she would blame me!"

"Blame you!" the boy lifted his head, and looked up into the beautiful young face. "Why, Alwynne, you saw what she said in the letter I got yesterday? She knows you for what you are, darling. She calls you an angel!"

Alwynne kissed him, and then turned his face to seawards with her two hands.

"Look! Isn't that a monster ship. Where is it going? To America, perhaps. Don't you wish you were on board her, going back to Janet?"

"If you were there, yes!" Basil answered, "but—"

Alwynne looked into his honest eyes again. "And you really, truly love me just as though I were your own sister?" she asked, softly.

"Just as though you were my own sister," the boy answered, his voice and face bearing full witness to the depth and truth of his affection.

Alwynne clung to his hand without speaking for a moment, and Basil looked at her.

He got a certain relief as he looked, and yet the boy's heart was heavy in his breast. He was weighed down by a curious depression—a mixture of remorse, of dread of anxiety.

"If I were only older and bigger and stronger!" he said, suddenly speaking his thoughts, as it were involuntarily, "I could do so much for you, Alwynne!"

"What more could you do?" the girl asked, gently. "You are the greatest comfort to me, Basil. I—I do not dare think what I should have done without you. What I should do now if you—"

Alwynne did not finish her sentence; her brows were contracted, as with a sudden pain, and her lips were set.

Basil sighed. He released himself from her touch, and leaned up against the boat; his boyish face seemed lined and troubled.

"I must go back to-morrow," he said after a little pause. "I have been here nearly a fortnight, and I know they must be wanting me, for there was a tremendous lot of work going on at the office when I was taken ill. Mr. Stopford was not at all pleased at having to give me a holiday."

"You were not fit for work!" Alwynne said, hurriedly. "You frightened me, Basil, you were so ill; but, oh! I was so glad to see you. It was so unexpected, and I did not know you knew where I was!"

"Basil told me," Basil said. He was silent a moment. "It was a wonderful thing for a youngster like me to get a fortnight's holiday. All the other boys were so jealous. It was Lord Taunton's doing!"

Alwynne's pale cheek flushed a little.

"Have you seen Lord Taunton, lately?"

Basil nodded his head.

"He ran up to town one day. He has been at Torre Abbey; someone is there very ill. I think it is his sister's husband, and Lord Taunton has had a lot of things to look after.

He came to look me up when he was in the office; he heard me cough, and he went straight off to Mr. Pennell. I do not know what he said, but I do know that I was told, to stop work immediately, and go away to the sea-side, if possible, and then when I got back to my bedroom in the boarding-house there I found the

note from Lord Taunton that I told you of, enclosing me a bank-note for ten pounds—a loan," he called it, and telling me to take care of myself, and to let him know how I was. What a real, true friend he is, Alwynne! What a splendid heart! I don't mind letting him help me, though you know I am a bit proud, because I know he really calls me his friend, and it is an honour to be the friend of such a man!"

Alwynne's face was bent down. She did not speak for a moment. When she did, her voice had a sort of stifled sound in it.

"And then—then you determined to come to me to be taken care of!"

Basil was flinging bits of broken wood and seaweed out to catch the inflowing tide.

"I did not know what to do," he said. "Of course, I thought of you, and I had a sort of half idea of going down to Torre to be with you; and then, in just one of those stranger chances that came in life, Blair came to see me, and told me you were here at Fordsea, and asked me off without delay to keep you company; and you know, Alwynne, you look ever so much better since I have been with you! Now what do you say to my conceit, eh?"

Alwynne was looking out to sea again. The big ship had moved a very little way; the sun was striking the white sails aslant now she was making for a course that would bear her out of sight before long.

"I wish," Alwynne said, in a low, dull sort of way, "I wish you were with me always, Basil, always!"

Basil flung another and larger piece of wood into the white foam of the waves; then he turned round and faced the girl. His cheeks had a bright spot of colour, and his eyes were full of light.

"Look here, Alwynne!" he said, in a boyish way, full of eagerness and excitement. "Look here, Alwynne, I've got something I want to say to you—something I must say. It's on my mind, and I am troubling about it. Will you forgive me if I seem as if I were prying into your affairs. You know me well enough by now, and—" he ceased suddenly, and then spoke as suddenly again.

"Alwynne," he said, almost nervously, "are you happy with Blair? Is he good to you; do you regret? Oh! dear, dear Alwynne, do tell me the truth. I got frightened when I am alone sometimes, and I am thinking of you always, you— It was all so quick. You had no time to think over everything, and you were in such distress, but yet Blair seemed—" He thrust his hands into his pockets with the sort of gesture that goes with a boy's actions, and yet there was very like else of the boy about him.

"If—if," he said, half-brokenly, "if I thought you were not happy, that he was not good. Yet, how could he be anything but good with such a face!"

Alwynne sat silent. She neither moved nor spoke, and the boy, deep in his thoughts, was almost unconscious of her silence. It was such a relief to him to think out his thoughts.

"You see, although he is my cousin, I know so little about him," he went on. "Janet remembers him a little, fair haired boy when she used to be in England with our parents; but his mother always lived abroad, and Blair seems to belong to another land and another family. I have asked him to tell me things about himself, but he always laughs. He is always laughing, and he says there is nothing to tell; that my mother and his father were cousins, and that, of course, we are cousins of the second generation. He is kind to me, and he never forgets to ask after Janet; and yet," Basil stopped abruptly, if he had spoken out his thoughts he would have said plainly, and without any hesitation, "yet, somehow, I don't like him, and I don't trust him, and I don't think he goes straight,"

He checked himself shortly, as he remembered all at once to whom he was speaking. He paused a moment, waiting for Alwynne to say something, and finding she made no reply, he repeated his first question.

"Alwynne, are you happy with Blair. Is he good to you. Only tell me that, and I won't bother you any more. I—"

He broke off again, this time even more abruptly than before, and his face turned crimson as he sprang to his feet. A shadow had suddenly fallen across them; and as Basil leaped up so hurriedly he discovered, in a startled way, that this shadow was none other than the man he was discussing—Blair Hunter himself!

CHAPTER XXIV.

He had come up to them softly, and had stood beside the old boat before either of them had dreamed of his presence.

His voice speaking an answer to Basil's question revealed this, and he laughed heartily as he saw the amusement, and other emotions, that flitted across the boy's face.

Alwynne had uttered a little cry, half of surprise, half of alarm; but after that she had sunk back into her old position, and every scrap of colour faded out of her face.

"You are a modest young gentleman, Master Basil, upon my word!" Blair said, lightly. "You make the most searching inquiries into a woman's secret thoughts, and then you coolly announce that is all you want, and if you get an answer you will be satisfied. Well, you are an invalid, so I suppose you must be humoured. Eh, Alwynne? Well, I will speak for my wife!"

He threw himself down on the sand at Alwynne's feet, and taking one of the girl's hands in his, he carried it to his lips.

"We thank you, Mr. Basil, exceedingly, for your anxiety concerning us, but we are happy to inform you that all is well with us—that we have found life, so far, a path full of flowers and sunshine; that, though our interests have run together for so short a while, and that before that time we were comparative strangers as the world would judge it, yet that our knowledge of one another is now as sweet as it is unlimited, and that we have grown to regard each other as that one kindred soul created by an All-seeing Power to render our union something higher, purer, and better than the ordinary marriage of everyday life. Is this not so, my darling?"

He looked at Alwynne as he spoke; and the boy, standing there still dismayed, uncomfortable, bewildered, noted, in a vague sort of way, how curious was the expression of his cousin's eyes, as they were bent on this girl's lovely face.

It also struck Basil, in the same vague way, that he had never realised, until now, what an odd shape and colour these same said eyes were.

Blair Hunter held Alwynne's slender hand in his two large ones, and caressed it gently, passing it to and fro across his lips.

"Is it not so, Alwynne!" he repeated, in the same low, tender tone. "Answer Basil, and satisfy his anxiety by telling him you are quite happy and contented!"

The girl looked back into the strange gaze fixed upon her. For an instant it was almost as though she struggled feebly against some invincible, but potent power. There was a drawn look, a kind of tension in her expression, which hurt Basil in an indefinite sort of way, and which puzzled him; but even as this was passing through his mind a relief came, for Alwynne's face changed. It had a quiet, peaceful look, and her voice was calm and sweet as ever, as she spoke the words her husband had uttered.

"I am quite happy and contented," she said, and her eyes were looking straight into Blair Hunter's as she spoke.

He kissed her hand, and put it back on her knee.

Then he turned to Basil, and laughed. As the boy said, he was always laughing.

"Now sir inquisitive, are you satisfied, may I ask? Wait till you get a wife yourself, and then see how you will like to be cross examined

on your most sentimental emotions. It is my belief you will be furious, Master Basil!" He ended his speech by flinging a bit of seaweed good-humouredly at the lad. Basil crimsoned.

"Of course I didn't mean to be rude or inquisitive or—anything. Only—only—" Blair Hunter ceased laughing, and his face assumed a gentle expression.

"My dear boy, don't think I misunderstand you for a single moment. I know you only spoke through affectionate interest, and both Alwynne and I are touched by your concern. Are we not, my wife?"

"Yes," Alwynne answered, in a quiet, subdued sort of way. She was leaning back against the boat, and her face had a dreamy, peaceful expression on it now.

Blair supported himself on one elbow, and gazed at her. He went on talking in a quiet soft sort of way, playing with the hem of her gown as he talked.

"Did I frighten you, my own? It was rather a sudden appearance. I came down all in a hurry, got through my business in town much sooner than I anticipated, and took the first train to be had. Fortunately, I caught an express, and was landed at Fordsea Station before eleven. I hurried to the house, and found you were out, so I only waited to get into this agger, with a glance of satisfaction at his white duck attire, and came off at once to find you!" he laughed softly. "I knew just exactly where you would be, Alwynne; that is what is called instinct, I believe, in everyday language. Is it not, Basil? What are you going. Well you can hurry up the lunch. I am almost starving. By the way, do you return to town this week?"

"To-morrow!" Basil said, briefly. He turned and walked across the sand towards the parade, and the rows of terraces all bearing large sounding, nautical names.

Once he looked back. He could see that the two he had left behind were sitting in exactly the same position. Alwynne did not seem to have moved an inch, and Blair Hunter was still gazing fixedly into her lovely face.

The boy sighed quickly, and his brow contracted. "I don't understand," he said to himself. "I don't understand!"

He was troubled by the vague, disquieting thoughts that filled his brain—this strange, unconquerable doubt that was fast becoming an antipathy—this dread, though of what exact nature or proportion he could not possibly define—this species of self-reproach which burdened his heart. He had never had much occasion to think deeply, either for himself or for others, in the life he had led with his sister for companion and protection; but since his arrival in England, whence he had been sent purely for the sake of his delicate health; and his small taste of independence, strengthened as it had been by Alwynne's sudden claim to his assistance, had roused all at once the spark of manliness within his breast, and turned his thoughts from boyish dreams to stronger material.

He suddenly found developing within him a character and a nature that he had been up to now totally in ignorance of possessing; and it was through his newly-opened eyes, as it were, that Basil regarded this cousin of his, and ganged him so shrewdly, although so indefinitely. He had been won by Blair's manner, by the laughing, handsome individuality of the man. His first series of letters back to his sister in America had been full of warm liking and admiration for the relative who had come to meet him, and offer him hospitality for a time. But Basil soon began to look below the surface, and dissatisfaction had already commenced to make itself felt in his feelings for Mr. Hunter, when his cousin almost overthrew him metaphorically (by announcing his immediate forthcoming marriage with Alwynne).

Of course, Basil had not been blind to his cousin's most natural admiration for the girl's beauty. He had seen her the day following her arrival at the humble boarding-house Basil



["ALWYNNE," SAID BASIL, ALMOST NERVOUSLY, "ARE YOU HAPPY WITH BLAIR?"]

called his home, and he had been, as it were, struck silent by the extreme loveliness that was presented to him. His manner had been so full of charm and thought that the boy's heart had gone out to him for that, and Alwynne had accepted his courteous offer of assistance in any way that was possible, because she saw it gave pleasure to Basil, her only friend.

There had been a talk of taking Alwynne to Blair's mother; but a week had sped away, and this scheme was not carried out, although Blair never let one day escape without coming to see Alwynne, and discuss her position with her. He told Basil he was endeavouring to persuade the girl to return to her mother, that being the one proper thing for her to do, in his opinion, but Alwynne only shook her head when this plan was put before her.

Basil was tormented by anxiety for the girl's sake. He had given her the whole of his young, boyish loyalty and affection, and he only yearned to be strong in every way so that he might be indeed her knight, her guardian, and her protector. His young heart swelled with pride as he thought of how she had turned to him in her sore distress. He never questioned her as to the secret of this distress, this agony of the mind that had driven her from the luxurious life which he had seen surrounding her, and made her an alien from her mother's care. It was enough that she had come. If only he might have confided all to Lord Taunton—even now Basil winced and cringed to himself as he recalled that day at the lawyer's office, when he had been forced, through loyalty to one friend, to be disloyal in a sense to another.

Had not Alwynne entreated him so eagerly, so passionately, to preserve an utter silence concerning her to Lord Taunton—what a happy relief it would have been for the boy! It was so hard to have to prevaricate to the young man with the marvellous eyes, the strong will, and the great, generous heart,

More especially was it hard to allow even a slight wrong to rest on Alwynne; and Basil knew that Lord Taunton had been disappointed at the outset in thinking the girl had forgotten and neglected her humble acquaintance of the steamboat.

The boy wondered, in a sort of weary way, as he walked on, what Lord Taunton's feelings could be concerning Alwynne's marriage. Boys, as a rule, don't see much sentiment in life; but Basil had always been a dreamer and a visionary, and the knowledge of the truth had come to him almost easily.

It was this knowledge which unconsciously was the real secret of his trouble about Alwynne and her happiness. Everything was muddled and chaotic in his mind, and most of all when he tried to define his thoughts and fears about his cousin. It was very nearly becoming a burden to the lad. A sort of responsibility seemed to have been thrust on his shoulders. He had an odd sort of feeling that Alwynne must be his care, that he must protect her; and yet, what protection could she need if the position was viewed calmly?

She had her husband—a man in every way more fitted to guard and protect her than a weak, delicate boy.

So would run the argument of common sense, but Basil could not dismiss this strange weight from his mind. He wished the marriage had not been so hurried. He wished he had urged Blair to take Alwynne to his mother first, and let a few months, at least, elapse before she bound herself to him.

Basil had an uneasy suspicion that Alwynne herself had disliked the hurry of the proceedings, and yet—yes she had acquiesced. She had performed her share in a quiet, subdued, yet perfectly voluntary way. There had been no coercion, no extraordinary amount of pleading as far as the boy could see, and yet—he always came to the word yet—why had Alwynne married Blair Hunter? That

was the riddle to be solved, and Basil could not think how he might arrive at the true solution.

He knew she had been touched by Blair's sympathy and solicitude, but it wanted more than that to suggest a possibility of making her future with this young man. Had it been a desire to settle the question of that future? Had she done what she had done because she was afraid of becoming a burden on him—Basil? Why had she refused to let Lord Taunton have the least knowledge of her real position? Why had she so resolutely forbidden all mention of his name?

Basil sighed and sighed again as he walked on. There was something strange, something heavy and incomprehensible in the very atmosphere, that surrounded all thought of Blair Hunter, and the feeling of fear for a desire to protect Alwynne grew and grew within his breast.

He stood on the terrace, and looked back once again.

Alwynne was sitting just in the same attitude, and Blair was leaning on his elbow, looking up into her face. Basil turned away suddenly. The vague fear in his heart seemed to turn all at once into a certainty—the certainty that Alwynne was neither now, nor had she been from the first, a free agent in her actions. That Blair Hunter possessed, in what form or power the boy could not determine, but that he did possess it, he was only too sure—some extraordinary hold over the will and mental attributes of the girl he had made his wife.

To Basil everything that had seemed so difficult to understand became at once clear and comprehensible, and with it came a new fear, vivid and distressing, that this power might be used for evil, not good, and bring an infinity of sorrow to the girl he had grown to love so well.

(To be continued.)



"IF IT WOULD BE ANY RELIEF TO YOUR FEELINGS TO CALL ME AN IDIOT, VENETIA," SAID PAUL, "PLEASE DO SO!"

NOVELETTE.]

THE DEANS OF ASHLEY.

CHAPTER I.

THE title does not in the least refer to those dignitaries of the Church distinguished by the title of "Very Reverend," and whose business it is to preside over our Cathedrals.

Ashley, indeed, did not boast such a thing as a church, much less a cathedral, for it was not a town, or even a village—nothing in the world but a grand old mansion, surrounded by its own park and wide-spreading acres—a home which had once been the talk of the country for its almost royal state and magnificence, and which had now fallen on evil fortunes, so that almost all its ancient glory had departed. But through the course of centuries, through wealth and poverty, the estate had always been in the possession of the same family, who were known far and wide as the Deans of Ashley.

That was all. Once it was whispered a baronetcy had been offered to the master of Ashley, and he had refused it with scorn. That was in the years when the Deans were rich and powerful, when their daughters married peers, and their sons won the fairest heiresses of the day. But all that was past and over now; and Ashley itself, had the old grey stone halls been able to speak, might have sighed "Ishabod," for the glory of the Deans had departed.

No one knew exactly when things began to go wrong. One Squire in a fit of pique against his eldest son left every penny he could alienate from the estate to his brother. The injured heir married beneath him, grew reckless, plunged into debt, and raised the first mortgage which had ever burdened the Ashley acres.

That was the first downward step; and nothing seemed to go right with the family afterwards until now the present Squire had made his son join with him in cutting off the entail, and then sent the young man adrift because he ventured to remonstrate with his father for bringing home a young and beautiful second wife.

There was a fearful quarrel. Kenneth Dean swore that he had been tricked into signing away his inheritance. The Squire retorted he had a right to please himself. Then Kenneth went abroad, no one knew where, and soon there came a report of his death.

The new Mrs. Dean came home to Ashley, bringing two children of her own with her. For a little while there were great festivities at the Place. The bride was beautiful and fascinating, young, still; she loved society, and issued her invitations recklessly, never heeding the Squire's faint murmurs about her extravagance.

And so things went on until the old man woke up one day to find ruin staring him in the face; a wife and seven children, only five of them his own, to provide for, and creditors abusing him in every direction.

He had made his son join him in cutting off the entail, but he had a strong love for his ancestral home. He swore with a bitter oath that he would live and die Dean of Ashley, and then he sent for his lawyer to help him to keep his vow.

And kept it was. At what a cost only Mrs. Dean and her children knew.

The Park was let for grazing; the gardens and orchards were leased to a professional florist and fruiterer, who saw his way to making a pretty penny out of his bargain.

The outlying farms were sold. Half the proceeds went towards redeeming the mortgage, half to paying the most pressing debts.

And at last, when everything was settled, Mr. Dean informed his wife he could allow

her four hundred a-year, and whatever that failed to find her she must go without.

"Four hundred! But I thought your income was five thousand, Bryan?"

"It was once! I have arranged for my lawyer to receive such income as is left me, and apply a certain part to reducing my debts. I regret that four hundred a-year is the utmost that can be spared for household expenses."

"But—the children?"

"Well, there must be clothes enough to last for a good many years," said Bryan, grimly, "judging by the bills, at least. And there is plenty of room for a regiment of children in this great house. Ashley is the healthiest spot for miles, so we'll hope they won't want a doctor, and then you'll only have to think of food and shoe leather."

Poor Mrs. Dean! She had been extravagant, but she was terribly punished for it. She had believed her husband a rich man, and she had spent his money lavishly; but, after all, no worse sin could be laid to her charge. Throughout the whole miserable business it was Bryan Dean who deserved most blame.

Attracted by Lena Dacosta's beauty he determined to marry her. He feared the fact of his property being entailed would prejudice the young widow against him, and so he persuaded his son to join him in freeing it.

He cast Kenneth adrift, because the young fellow remonstrated at the fraud practised on him when he discovered the entail had only been cut off to further his father's second marriage; and then too indolent even to warn his wife of her danger, he let her plunge into every fashionable extravagance, while he speculated wildly at the same time.

"Pity the Squire!" exclaimed Mr. Dean's lawyer, when a lady client ventured to suggest before him that the disasters at Ashley Place were all Mrs. Dean's work. "Pity the Squire and blame his wife. Why, my dear lady, it's

just the reverse. I should feel inclined to do so. Mrs. Dean was utterly inexperienced in country life. She was young and fond of pleasure; no one warned her she was going beyond her husband's income."

"And now he has to suffer for it," said the lady, sympathetically.

"He won't suffer," said Lovel Clinton, sharply. "There is one person Bryan Dean will take care of through all reverses—himself. He will leave his wife and children to economise here, while he spends half the year at Homburg or London as a gay, elderly bachelor. Oh, dear, no! All the tedium and monotony of poverty will fall on the others! The Squire knows how to look after himself."

And he did. For his own private use he kept just double the sum he allowed his wife for all household expenses. Mrs. Dean and the children lived at Ashley Place from January to December. The Squire found he required "change." He went to London directly after Easter, only returning to the Place in July. September he always spent at some continental health resort, and with visits at country houses afterwards, it was well on towards Christmas before he came home.

He really managed to be as popular in society as though he had been free from debts and children. The man was selfish to the backbone, and Lena Deane, when she came to know him as he was, regretted from the bottom of her heart her second marriage, and wished she had been content to remain Mrs. Dacosta, with a modest jointure of five hundred a year.

She forfeited every penny of this when she married again. The principal was in the hands of trustees until the children came of age, when it was divided equally between them. The interest or some portion of it could be appropriated to their education.

This was a godsend to Mrs. Dean. Maurice was only ten and Venetia eight when the crash came; and from a gay, country house, Ashley Place was changed into a poverty-stricken prison. When the Squire hinted in pretty plain terms it was hard he should have to support another man's children, their mother was able to retort the boy and girl were provided for, and that, if he wished it, from that hour their expenses should be paid for out of their own small fortunes.

Happily the trustees were old and tried friends of Mrs. Dean. They understood how sore her heart must have been at having to come to them with her story, and they made things as easy for her as the will of the late Mr. Dacosta permitted.

Maurice was to go to Marlborough at once, his school bills would be paid by them; and they would also pay his mother fifty pounds a year for his holiday expenses, clothes, &c. With regard to his sister, Venetia seemed too young for school.

"If she stays at home she will grow up a drudge to the younger children," said Mrs. Dean, bravely. "In justice to my eldest girl, she must have the advantages her fortune entitles her to."

So Venetia had gone to school likewise, her holiday being spent at Ashley, though certainly not at the Squire's expense. And so the years went on very quietly, each one finding Bryan Dean a little more selfish than the last, until, just as Venetia was leaving school, her brother Maurice died.

A promising youth of nineteen, the darling of his mother's heart. He was cut off in an hour. A boating excursion had started for a summer afternoon of pleasure. There was a collision, and the little craft was upset. Only one of her passengers was killed—Lena Dean's only son.

The Squire came home to attend the funeral. He always posed as a prominent figure in any public event, and Maurice Dacosta had been a favourite at Ashley from the day of his first coming there after his mother's marriage.

"Good gracious, Lena!" he cried, complainingly, to his wife. "You look positively haggard, and you ought to be quite a young woman. You are not forty yet."

"I am thirty-nine, Bryan, and my life has been a troubled one for nearly ten years. You cannot wonder if I am aged."

"Well, at least things will be easier for you now," said the Squire, with a strange want of tact. "Poor Maurice's little fortune will come to you, and—"

"Are you dreaming, Bryan? It goes to Venetia, every shilling of it. I am glad to feel I gain nothing by my boy's death."

"You should think of your other children," said the Squire, testily. "Remember, I can't live for ever. You don't concern yourself much about my health, Lena; but I am not young."

She sighed. She could not tell him in so many words he had done nothing for his children, but she felt it.

"I have just concluded new arrangements," went on the Squire, pompously. "Clinton did not at all approve of them, but a man is not bound to submit to his lawyer in everything."

"Mr. Clinton is a very shrewd, clever man," said Lena, gravely. "I am sure he has your interests at heart, Bryan."

The Squire told his story at last; though, from his manner, it is possible he felt the least bit ashamed of what he had done.

The person who held the mortgage on Ashley had recently sold the claim on it to a stranger, and the latter had offered to remit all interest on the sum advanced during the Squire's life on condition that at his death the property reverted to the mortgagee.

It meant that Bryan Dean had more money to spend during his own lifetime, and that at his death his wife and children were homeless.

"I always said I would live and die Dean of Ashley," said the Squire, when he had related the most selfish act of his selfish career; "and of course the girls are sure to marry, and you will have your settlements. If we had had a son I might have hesitated, but—"

His wife interrupted him, with flashing eyes.

"If we had had ten sons you would not have hesitated!" she said scornfully. "My settlements, as you call them, bring in eighty pounds a year. You know two thousand was the amount you endowed me with!"

"The girls are sure to marry," repeated the Squire, calmly. "Besides, there is Venetia. She will feel it a duty to help her mother and sisters."

Mrs. Dean let this pass.

"Who holds the mortgage now?"

"Really, my dear, I don't see that that matters. The name is King. I believe a most gentlemanly man according to his solicitor. I consider that I have done very well for the old place. I was always fond of Ashley, Lena."

His wife, who, though she had had a foreign mother, and spent half her life abroad, was yet far more English at heart than the Squire, looked round the shabby yet beautiful old drawing-room, with its quaint, picturesque, familiar furniture, and sighed.

"I thought you loved the place enough to keep it for your children. I have endured ten years of dreary poverty just in the hope that some day I should see Myrtle reigning here."

"Myrtle!" and the Squire spoke more bitterly than he felt, because he knew he had behaved cruelly. "Myrtle is a plain, awkward girl of fourteen. She looks all legs and arms, and her face is so freckled one can hardly bear to look at it. Myrtle would never make a fitting mistress for Ashley, my dear! If you had wished such a destiny for her you should have transmitted to her a little of your beauty."

Mrs. Dean turned very white. She could bear a good deal from him, but taunts about her children tried her patience.

"Myrtle has had no advantages," she said

slowly. "Before she was five years old she was robbed of all chances of them."

"A good many women living rent free would find it possible to bring up five children decently on four hundred a year," retorted the Squire.

"You forget," said Lena, reproachfully, "you came home every year for weeks together, requiring the best of everything. The savings of months went to make you content for a few days. You have stood in the children's light, and robbed them of every little indulgence my economy might have given them."

"It's no use going on like this," said the Squire, placidly. "I am not a domesticated man, and I can't live on cold shoulder of mutton and rice pudding for the sake of my offspring. You ought not to expect it, Lena."

"I do not expect it. Reports say you were even less considerate towards your first born. That you sent him from you without even the proverbial shilling given to prodigals."

"Don't mention Kenneth," said the Squire, with something like a groan. "Nothing has gone well with me since he left. Perhaps if my boy had lived, I might not have been the last Dean of Ashley. Lena, my wife, our marriage has not turned out very brilliantly for either of us, but reproaches won't improve things. As long as I live you will be no worse off than you are now, and I need not tell you that for the children's sakes I shall take care of myself. Try and find husbands for two or three of the girls, and then things will look up."

"Oh, Bryan, how you talk? Myrtle is not fifteen, and whom are they likely to see here? Besides," and the poor woman spoke nothing but the simple truth when she gave her opinion. "I think marriage brings people a great deal of trouble."

"Have it your own way, and don't blame me!" retorted the Squire, as he flung out of the room in a rage.

The next day he was off to Paris, and poor Lena Dean was left alone with her tribe of daughters.

CHAPTER II.

LOVEL CLINTON still retained the conduct of the Squire's affairs; though, after the latter's arrangement with Mr. King, there was very little to manage, still there were a few rents to collect.

The few tenants had to be soothed in their various complaints of their landlord's neglect, and finally the incoming money had to be forwarded; the lion's share to the Squire's London banker, the minor portion to the modest red brick building in the cold, country town of Morton, where Lena Dean kept her slender banking account.

Perhaps there was a fear in Mr. Clinton's mind that if he gave up the charge of her husband's affairs the poor lady might find some difficulty in getting her meagre allowance.

Perhaps he had worked so long for the Deans of Ashley that he clung to the last scion of the old race in spite of his faults.

The office of the Squire's agent was, of course, entirely honorary, but then Lovel Clinton was a rich man, and did not need to add to his wealth.

He had a kind, cheerful wife, and one only son, who was already a partner in his father's business, having said (when the choice of a career was given him), with delightful common sense, that as there had been a Clinton in Morton to manage people's legal matters for them for over two hundred years, he thought it was a pity they should not continue so to be.

Mr. Clinton, senior, was a good bit younger than the Squire, and his son, Paul, was only seven-and-twenty.

In a country town, where there were very few men who had not been husbands and fathers for years, Paul was thought quite a confirmed old bachelor.

It was the custom in Morton for a man (this may account for the rarity of men in the little town) to marry as soon as ever he could afford it. If he saw no chance of being able to afford it soon he emigrated to London to improve his fortune. If the improvement came he fetched his bride.

In any case he never returned as a resident to Morton; and so to see a young man with an income of, say two hundred a year, not married was a thing unheard of in the town.

Paul Clinton might have married years before. At least, everyone said so. Was he not known to be an only son? Had not the wealthy lawyer implored him to find a wife, and offered to give up the house in High-street to the young couple, and retire with his wife to a bijou residence a mile or two out? And were there not eligible girls by the dozen in Morton, if only young Clinton had looked about him instead of thinking only of his books and clients?

This was Paul's only blemish in the eyes of his neighbours. Except for his aversion (which, by the way, was taken for granted, since he had never confessed it) to the married state the young lawyer was very popular, and quite a townsman to be proud of.

Lovel Clinton and his wife were good enough to look over their boy's one blemish, and to be proud of him as it was; but then, of course, they could not be expected to understand the feelings of those who had grown-up daughters.

On a beautiful June morning the two lawyers, father and son, sat at breakfast. Mrs. Clinton was away on a visit to a married niece, who stood much in need just then of motherly care, so that the gentlemen were alone, and had, with true masculine unsociability, each his own pile of letters, which occupied time and attention, leaving none for conversation; but a sudden exclamation from the senior partner roused Paul sufficiently for him to inquire what was the matter.

"Either it's a hoax or the man's mad!"

"What man? It's the Squire of Ashley, sir, I incline to the opinion that he is mad!"

"What put him into your head?"

"Various trifles. The chief, I think, your excitement. You take more interest in the Squire's affairs than in your most profitable clients!"

"Don't pretend to be mercenary, Paul. It doesn't suit you, my boy."

"I detest Dean of Ashley," said Paul, with youthful intolerance. "I can't think how you put up with him. When I think of his wife and children I should like to knock him down!"

"Which would not help them particularly," said the elder man, drily. "Now, Paul, put aside your prejudice and listen to me. This letter is not from the Squire, but it concerns him."

"Has he robbed a bank?"

"Paul! Do you remember Fern Cottage, a little place on the Ashley estate where—"

"You need not go on, father. I remember it perfectly. As a schoolboy I went to a fête got up there in honour of poor Maurice Dacosta's birthday. It was just before the crash."

"Yes. The Squire never thought of letting Fern Cottage till then. It is a pretty little place, seven or eight rooms in all; but the gardens are large enough for a mansion, and old Miss Nairn took a fancy to the Cottage, and paid a hundred a year for it."

"Till she died, since which time it has been empty, and going to wreck and ruin. The last time I was at Ashley Place Mrs. Dean said it only she understood anything of gardening she would take the Cottage in hand herself and try and make something of the fruit, for the house would never let unless the Squire spent a large sum on repairs."

"Well, here is an offer to take Fern Cottage on a repairing lease, and pay the same rent as the last tenant."

"The woman must be mad!"

"It's a man," corrected Mr. Clinton, "and, what is more, a lawyer!"

"He can't know what a state the property is in."

"I should think he knew something about it. It is Isherwood who writes, the very man who managed the Squire's fine piece of business with Mr. King."

"Perhaps he wants it for King himself?"

"He wants it, he says, for a client of the name of Carew, a widower, with one child. He says that Mr. King will guarantee not to disturb the tenant, if we grant a lease of fourteen years. You see, as the Squire now only has a life interest in the property, no one would care to take a lease of it without some assurance from his successor."

Paul Clinton, looked strangely thoughtful.

"I should have thought that no one beyond the immediate neighbourhood had ever heard of Fern Cottage."

"Miss Nairn had a great many friends. Someone who visited her may have spoken of the house to Mr. Carew."

"I don't see why we should trouble ourselves to put another hundred a year in the Squire's pocket," said Paul, irritably. "Not a penny of the rent will find its way to poor Mrs. Dean, I expect."

Lovel Clinton looked grave.

"I might persuade the Squire to let her have half of it. The windfall will be so unexpected he could hardly refuse. My only doubt is, living such a lonely life as Mrs. Dean does, would it be distasteful to her to have an utter stranger domiciled so near her?"

"She wouldn't mind that," replied Paul.

"All good women have a partiality for motherless children. Depend upon it, however disagreeable or antiquated Mr. Carew was, she would put up with him for the sake of his child."

"Miss Carew may not be a child," hazarded the elder lawyer. "The letter says 'a widower with one daughter.' Mr. Isherwood adds that his client will call on me this morning to hear all particulars of Fern Cottage. He offers himself as Mr. Carew's reference, and adds that he will be an agreeable addition to Morton society."

"Morton society won't see much of the old gentleman unless he sets up a carriage. It's four miles if it's a step to Fern Cottage. I think you will have to receive Mr. Carew, father, and make the best of him. Perhaps, when he finds the cottage is utterly out of repair, and its gardens almost a wilderness, he may repeat his offer."

"I wish he had not made it," said Mr. Clinton, testily. "I don't like surprises. I am too old for them. Well, Mr. Carew will hardly reach Morton before twelve. I have to go to two or three places, but I shall be in long before that."

Apparently the lawyer was mistaken in his conclusion. He had hardly left the house ten minutes, and it was barely half-past nine, when one of the clerks came in to Paul's private room to announce Mr. Carew.

"He asked if you would see him, Mr. Paul, when he heard your father was out. He says he wishes to return to London by an early train, and cannot call again."

"It's a nuisance," was Paul's private reflection, but his answer was, "All right, Sanders, show him in."

A surprise awaited Paul. Instead of the fussy, consequential personage he had expected, there entered a man in the pride of youth and health—an handsome and noble-looking specimen of an English gentleman. Carew stood six feet two, his shoulders were broad, his figure erect. His face was bronzed, as though he had spent many years beneath a foreign sky. A thick beard and moustache hid the lower portion of his face, but that it was a face to trust Paul felt instinctively. The dark hair was crisp and curly, a faint scar was visible on the broad forehead, and the large, grey eyes had in them a shade of melancholy. Paul Clinton was used to studying faces, and

he decided promptly he should like Mr. Carew, though he wondered why in the world such a man should wish to bury himself at Fern Cottage.

A few remarks exchanged, and he found himself telling Mr. Carew so plainly.

"The house has not been inhabited for five years. Mr. Dean is too poor to spend a penny on it, and my father says it would take over a hundred pounds to put it in proper repair."

Carew nodded.

"Mr. Isherwood told me as much. I came down with him last week, and the old caretaker showed us all over the cottage and gardens."

"And you were not dismayed at their neglected state?"

"I should not have dreamed of taking the place without King's guarantee. I hear that Mr. Dean, of Ashley is an old man, and that at his death the property passes to Mr. King. I have seen the latter, and am quite satisfied respecting his intentions."

"Then you have achieved more than my father. We at Morton have grown to look on Mr. King as almost a notorious person. We have heard so much of him and never seen him. Mr. Isherwood seems to do everything for him—even write his letters."

"Isherwood is a very clever fellow," replied Carew, "and his wife is charming! I left my little girl with her while I came down here."

"I suppose it was the Isherwoods who first told you of Fern Cottage?"

Mr. Carew slightly altered the question in his reply.

"Isherwood thought the place would agree with Dolly, my little girl I mean, and that was the only thing that mattered to me. Will you try and get this affair settled as soon as possible, Mr. Clinton? I will send in workmen the day the lease is signed, for I want to settle at Fern Cottage before much of the summer is over."

"Well," said Paul to his father, when the latter returned. "I have seen the Squire's future tenant, and his heart is set on Fern Cottage. Nothing I could say would dissuade him. Someone had told him the air would be good for his child, and he is red hot on it."

"Then Miss Carew is a child?"

"I never asked him. He called her 'his little girl.' He looked about thirty."

"Only thirty?"

"Well, he might be more. He is very sun-burnt, and holds himself like a soldier. I took quite a fancy to him, and begin to think with Mr. Isherwood he will be an acquisition to the neighbourhood."

"Did he mention the Deans?"

"Said he understood the Squire was an old man. Oh, you needn't look alarmed, sir! I assure you I never said a word against Mr. Dean!"

"I wonder what he will say to our having found him a tenant?"

"Very likely refuse him because he was not consulted in the first place. He's the most pig-headed, ungrateful man!"

"Paul!"

However, the Squire behaved better than Paul Clinton had predicted. He graciously approved of Mr. Carew, and in a burst of generosity declared that twenty pounds of the rent might go to his wife's account; the other eighty would be very useful to himself, for at his time of life a man required many little comforts.

"When did Dean of Ashley not require them?" asked Paul, sarcastically. "Well, sir, I shall go over to Ashley Place with the news. I shouldn't care for Mrs. Dean to hear from any outsider that Fern Cottage was let."

"It seems to me, Paul, you are always ready to go to Ashley Place," said Mr. Clinton, meaningly.

"Have you any objection?"

"Not the slightest, my boy. You know that for years my hope has been to see you marry, and I know no fairer, sweeter girl than Venetia Dacosta."

"Venetia is the nicest girl I know," admitted Paul. "But you are running into a big mistake, sir; I shall never ask her to marry me."

"Why not?"

"Two or three reasons. I like her too much to marry her knowing I could not give her the romantic affection she would desire. Poor Venetia has had a very sad picture of matrimony before her eyes, and the consequence is she will remain single all her days, unless—"

"Unless what, Paul?"

"Unless she meets some mysterious hero, and falls in love with him before she knows what she is about. He would have to be a veritable knight of olden times to win her heart, for at present her one idea of men is that they are all a race of monsters, and that you—for whom she confesses a warm regard—are only the exception which proves the rule."

"Poor child!" exclaimed the lawyer, heartily. "Well, I don't know that one can wonder."

"Venetia's objections to matrimony will be a blessing to her half-sisters," said Paul, sagely. "She will have five hundred a-year of her own the day she comes of age; while, whenever the Squire dies there will be just eighty pounds per annum for her mother and the five children."

Mr. Paul Clinton reached Ashley Place at seven. He had been a frequent visitor there ever since the days when he and Maurice Daosta were as close friends as the five years between them warranted.

Mrs. Dean trusted him and his father implicitly. All the children regarded Paul almost as a big brother, and even Venetia admitted that he was "nearly as nice as his father."

Miss Daosta was twenty now, and the fairest maiden in all the neighbourhood. Alone of Mrs. Dean's daughters she had inherited her mother's wondrous beauty, while years of care and trouble had given her a thoughtfulness and gravity which her mother had never possessed in her youth.

Venetia's face had more character and intellect than Mrs. Dean's, but the girl was not in the least a strong-minded, dictatorial young person.

She clung to her mother with the tenderest affection. She was goodness itself to her five sisters; but—Venetia was only human—she simply detested her stepfather; regarding him as the blight on all their lives, and with the intolerance and sweeping verdict of youth, poor Venetia honestly believed that mankind in general were as selfish and unfeeling as the only member of the sex she was familiar with—Dean of Ashley.

There were plentiful signs of poverty to greet Paul Clinton on every side as he walked up the avenue which led to Ashley Place.

The chestnuts were in the first beauty of their blossoming—hardly full blown as yet, but still sufficiently out to give promise of their future glory; the sky was cloudless, perfect blue.

But, alas! though Nature had been bountiful, art and labour, whose expenditure both need money, were sadly wanting.

The lodge was shut up, the railings were rusty for want of paint, the gravel walk was so full of weeds that, but for the chestnut trees, it would have been difficult to determine where the turf ended and the gravel began. Paul could remember when the lawns of Ashley had been smooth as velvet, the flower beds brilliant all the summer. The beds were neglected and trampled on now, and the grass was rough and uneven, being now at the mercy of the farmer's sheep being turned out there to graze, instead of the care and pride of an army of gardeners with their mowing machines. A high wire fence cut off the narrow portion of ground still reserved for the private use of the Deans.

Paul pushed open a little gate in the fence and entered. He came at once upon two of the children busy gardening—nice little girls

enough, in blue galates frocks and holland pinafores. But, alas! with that marked absence of beauty to which their father had referred so crucially.

"Where's your mother, Lilly?" asked Paul, when he had good-naturedly assisted to remove a hard-rooted weed which resisted all the childish efforts. "I want to speak to her."

"Please don't," pleaded the youngest of the Deans, simply. "Mr. Stubbs came here last night to 'speak to' mother, and she has been crying ever since!"

Paul patted the childish head kindly.

"I won't make her cry. And Venetia—"

"Venetia is very angry," replied the little girl, simply; "but she says it is only what she expected, and she is not at all surprised."

"But what has happened?"

"I don't know."

The other small gardener here thought it time to join in the conversation.

"No. They didn't tell any of us children, not even Myrtle; but Myrtle says she knows it is something dreadful, because Venetia has written to Mr. Arundel."

Mr. Arundel was the only survivor of Miss Daosta's guardians. That she had written to him did seem to imply something very untoward had happened.

Paul hesitated. Should he go on to the house, or would his presence seem an intrusion at such a time? The question was settled for him by the little girls.

"Here comes Bessie," they cried, in a breath, "she'll tell you if you can see mother."

He left the small gardeners at their work, and went on to meet Venetia. If, indeed, trouble had befallen the Deans he would rather hear of it out of earshot of the Squire's little daughters.

Miss Daosta was just twenty. She had been educated at a first-rate school, and was accomplished in the best sense of the word; but for the last three years she had lived at Ashley Place, the sharer of her mother's sorrows, and the life had given a touch of bitterness to her temper, sweet though it naturally had been.

If only Venetia could have loved and looked up to anyone she would have softened into a noble woman. As it was, she loved no one but her mother and the children, and looked up to no human creature.

She was a charming girl even in her attempted cynicism and defiant wilfulness, but if the charm was to continue when her girlhood was past she needed softening.

She wore a blue serge dress exquisitely made, but plain and severe to a degree. A collar and cuffs of spotless linen completed her attire. Her head was bare, save for the coronal of plaits coiled on the top. Paul, who knew her well, could see anger and impatience even in her walk.

"What is the matter, Venetia?"—he called her by her name as a matter of course, having known her from the time she was two years old. The children seem impressed with the fear something dreadful has happened.

"Poor little things!" and her voice softened for an instant. "Do you know, Paul, I can't help being fond of them, though they are his children."

"And what is the matter? You had better tell me. You know of old I never betray your confidence, and I may be able to help."

"No one can do that. You know Stubbs?"

"Unfortunately I have not that honour, but I gleaned from the children he was connected with the disaster. They said he 'wanted to speak to their mother,' and she had been crying ever since!"

"Well, Stubbs is a livery stableman at Greyling. I should have thought you would have heard of him!"

"You forget, young lady, that though Greyling is only seven miles from Ashley Place it is twelve from Morton. No doubt Mr. Stubbs employs a Greyling lawyer, and I, if I required

a livery stable, should patronise those in my own town."

"Well, it seems whenever the Squire has been here for the last three years he has been to Stubbs for horses and carriages, of course forgetting such a trifling item as the bill. The poor man struck last spring, and refused to give further credit, and the Squire took offence, and declared he would not pay a penny on account of the fellow's insolence. I suppose a summons would have come here, only our worthy relative departed before it could be issued. He has been abroad ever since, and poor Stubbs is at his wife's end. He has lost several customers through the Squire's spite. For, of course, people remarked he no longer patronised Stubbs, and he invented a very plausible reason. Finally the unfortunate livery stableman gets into debt himself, and will be turned out into the streets if he does not pay his rent by quarter-day!"

"Don't go on, Venetia. I can guess the rest. Mrs. Dean paid him out of her own pocket."

"Her will was good, but unfortunately two hundred odd pounds is more than six months' income. She gave Stubbs a cheque for every shilling she had in the bank, and, because I knew she would break her heart if trouble came to the man through her worthless husband, I have written to ask my trustee to advance the rest."

"Venetia, that was foolish!"

"It was idiotic!" returned the girl, frankly; "but what could I do. Mr. Arundel will be sending mamma fifty pounds for my board in three weeks' time. If he chooses to advance it well and good."

"But afterwards. Two hundred pounds will make a great gap in your mother's income."

"Of course. She has been crying ever since to think how she is to manage. I tell her to send away one of the maids, and to cultivate a taste for vegetarian diet. If only we could live on the fruits of the earth we should get on triumphantly, but unluckily we all, even the children, have a marked partiality for carnivorous food."

"Venetia, do be serious."

"My dear Paul, I never was more so. Starvation stares us in the face. I have suggested to mother various ways of increasing our resources, such as turning a mangle or copying circulars; but she is not of an enterprising spirit, and positively declines to regard either employment as the high road to fortune!"

"Venetia!"

"Well," said the girl, almost pettishly, "what do you want? Would you rather I sat down and cried? As mother does nothing else it would make the domestic atmosphere unpleasantly damp and depressing to the children, and I don't see the use of it. But—"

"I can't bear to see you so flippant."

Her mood changed then, and a strangely softened look came into her face.

"I am sorry, really, Paul. I would do anything in the world for mother and the children, only how can I help them? If I went out as a governess Mr. Arundel would stop the allowance for my board. You see, he has some power over me. If I took in plain needlework he would make a fuss, and there's nothing else."

"You mustn't think of that," said Paul, gravely. "You know, Venetia, I feel about the Squire pretty much as you do; only I can't bear to abuse him before his wife and children."

"Well," and the girl drew a sigh of relief, "in the very impoverished state of our household I should say he would not trouble us with a visit this summer. There's one thing to be thankful for."

"You have never asked me why I came to-night, Venetia?"

"To tell you the truth," she said, with a charming smile. "I have come to take your visits like the sunshine, as a matter of course."

Had you any special reason for coming to-night?"

He told her about Fern Cottage, and how the Squire had agreed that twenty pounds of the rent should go to her mother.

"O-o-f-f-f-f-f!" she said, with a little toss of her head. "Isn't he generous? But, Paul, the man must be mad!"

"I thought so till I saw him."

"And then how did he convert you to a belief in his sanity?"

"I took a fancy to him."

"Paul, you will never grow up," said Venetia, reprovingly. "Why, I have given up 'taking fancies' years ago, and you at twenty-seven, a fully qualified lawyer, to continue the weakness! It's babyish of you!"

"Well, it's a fact."

"And your father?"

"He hasn't seen Mr. Carew."

"Carew!" repeated the girl, musingly. "It's rather a good name. Does he belong to the Carews of Saltley?"

"I really didn't ask him."

"And what is his profession, or rather, what was it? He must have retired if he means to settle in such a remote place as Fern Cottage."

"Unfortunately I forgot to inquire. Venetia, I can see contempt written in your eye. If it would be any relief to your feelings to call me an idiot, please do so."

"I think your simplicity is touching!"

"You need not be anxious about your step-father's rent. Carew's reference is Isherwood, the lawyer."

"Ah! Then he is at least respectable."

"He looked so."

"Perhaps he has some incurable disease, and wants to spend the end of his life in seclusion. Did you say he was married?"

"I didn't say, but he is a widower, with one daughter."

"Poor girl! Fancy bringing a fashionable young lady to rusticate in such a spot!"

"My dear Venetia, Miss Carew is not in the least what you mean when you talk of a young lady."

"Oh!" Venetia's eyes opened. "You mean she is of uncertain age—an old maid, in fact? Well, if she is not young enough to think of dances and lovers, and that sort of thing, she may make herself contented here."

"I am certain she is not the age to think of such vanities. I believe she and her father are devoted to each other, and that they will be very happy here."

"And what is his disease?"

"I am not a doctor," remarked Paul, mischievously, leaving her in the false impression that Carew was a tottering old gentleman, and his daughter a middle-aged spinster; "but I should think possibly it was excitability. I never saw anyone more anxious about anything than he was about getting Fern Cottage."

"I daresay mother will go and call on Miss Carew if she is not very objectionable."

"I am sure it will be a kindly act."

"And when are they coming?"

"Just as soon as the Cottage can be got ready."

And then, deciding not to trouble poor Mrs. Dean in her grief, Paul Clinton said good-night to Venetia, and went home.

Mr. Arundel answered her ward's letter in person. He was a kind-hearted man, but he had not the slightest pity for Dean of Ashley, and he would not waste a penny of Miss Dacosta's fortune on paying his debts.

Venetia secured half-an-hour alone with her guardian, and he put her position before her more plainly than she had ever understood it before.

The fortune left by her father had largely increased in the last eighteen years, since not above half the interest had been spent since Mrs. Dacosta forfeited the income; while since Maurice died something less than a quarter had sufficed for his sister's expenses.

The money in the funds, Mr. Arundel told Venetia, amounted to twenty-four thousand

pounds. This would be settled on her absolutely before she married, but as long as she remained single she could only receive the interest.

"Then next May I shall have over seven hundred a year?"

"No, my dear. Your father was a jealous man, and he foresaw his wife's second marriage. His will was so worded as to prevent her from benefiting from your generosity. Up to thirty if you reside with your mother you only receive a hundred a year for your board, and half as much again for your private expenses. At the age of thirty, married or single, you enjoy the whole interest."

"But it sounds cruel!"

"My dear Venetia, there are, unfortunately, cases on record where a girl, whose marriage deprived her relations of their support, suffered very bitterly in consequence. Mr. Dacosta's idea was to pave the way for your marrying young. You can see for yourself that, kind and loving as your mother is, she possesses no strength of character. Had your fortune been under her control she would have sacrificed it long ago for the benefit of her second husband."

"Then can I do nothing to help her?"

"I should imagine your companionship and the sum paid for your board made a very great help. You can do no more for the next ten years—inless you marry."

"I shall never marry."

"Well, if you change your mind," said the old gentleman, smiling, "and the husband you choose is worth his salt, he will not object to a clause in your settlements giving a little help—say two hundred a-year from your income to Mrs. Dean for her life."

Venetia summed up Mr. Arundel's decision to her mother in these cheerful terms,—

"It's no use, dear, he can't help us, so we had better all turn vegetarians on the spot. Unfortunately, Mary cooks vegetables rather worse than she does everything else; but, no doubt, with constant practice, she will improve. Cabbages and carrots seem most abundant just now, so I should suggest cabbage soup, with an after-course of carrot pudding for dinner."

CHAPTER III.

"HAVE you seen Fern Cottage?"

It was just three weeks since Mr. Carew had signed his agreement to take the deserted house on a long lease, and now this question was in everyone's mouth.

The village people, the townfolks from Morton and Grayling, ay, and a few county families from the beautiful outlying estates, were all much interested in the stranger whose coming amongst them was fixed for the first of July.

Money had been spent lavishly. Quite an army of workmen and gardeners had been employed within and without and to the intense satisfaction of the village, which was very clannish, a man who had once been employed at Ashley Place, and who was born and bred in the neighbourhood, had been engaged as Mr. Carew's factotum, while his wife was to be housekeeper and general manager.

Mr. and Mrs. Hawkins had been at the Place when Lena Dean came home a bride. It was natural they should retain a grateful recollection of the beautiful mistress whom they had left before her downfall. And meeting Venetia and her mother in the village lane one night, Mrs. Hawkins could not resist pouring out the story of their good fortune.

"The best wages we ever had, ma'am, and Mr. Carew's a gentleman, every inch of him. If you could but see the Cottage, it looks fit for a palace. The furniture came in to-day; if I might make bold to ask you to step in and look round. The master and Miss Carew are coming to-morrow."

"Have you seen Miss Carew?" demanded Venetia, who was curious on this point.

"No, miss, nor her pa neither. But they must be real gentry, from the furniture."

"Which means they have money," reflected Venetia, rather indignantly.

But she was curious to see Fern Cottage in its new aspect, and persuaded her mother to accept Mrs. Hawkins's invitation to look at it.

The house was built entirely on two floors, and in the rear, shut off from the main building by a flowering hedge, was a funny little erection of two rooms put up by Miss Nairn for her servants.

This hut was to be the abode of Mr. and Mrs. Hawkins; the gardener, coachman, and groom were to have cottages in the village. Only Miss Carew's maid would sleep under the same roof as her mistress.

Two of the three sitting-rooms were furnished as library and dining-room; the third was a puzzle to the visitors—the largest and most elegant apartment in the house, which had formerly been the drawing-room, now it was carpeted all over with dark green felt. The walls were covered with pictures, but of furniture proper there was hardly any. A huge wooden cupboard at one end, an arm-chair and a low one, a small, round table—this was actually all Mr. Carew had sent to fill a room sixteen feet by twenty!

The dining-room made up for it. It was a most home-like, cosy room, and the library made Venetia feel covetous, so luxurious and tasteful did it seem.

She thought, however, in Miss Carew's place she should have had her piano and easel in the drawing-room; it was so much larger and airier.

"Perhaps Mr. Carew is an author, and wants an empty room to pace up and down in when he is planning his stories. What lovely pictures he has! I think that is the most beautiful face I ever saw. It surely can't be Miss Carew herself?"

She was looking at the picture of a lovely girl dressed in virgin white, with a bunch of forget-me-nots in her hand. It stood over the fireplace in the "empty room," as Venetia called the former drawing-room, and was beautiful, not only for its subject, but as a work of art. Venetia felt by instinct the portrait had been painted by a master-hand.

"Oh, no, miss!" said Mrs. Hawkins, promptly. "Miss Carew's name is Dorothy, and you can see yourself this picture has Mary engraved on the frame. It's most likely just a fancy likeness!"

"How do you know Miss Carew's name is Dorothy?"

"There's a beautiful set of white statues, miss," (Mrs. Hawkins called them statys), "and the case they came in was written on, 'for Dorothy's room.' It's a good name, Miss Venetia, though a homely one."

"Well, I think Miss Carew will have a lovely home!" said Venetia, with something like a sigh. "Mother, we must be going home. You'll come and call on her soon, won't you?" this last was added when they had started to walk back to the Place.

"My dear, child, if these people are rich they can't want to know us. What pleasure would it be to an old man, and his prim, middle-aged daughter, to visit such a dreary house as ours, when the only cheerful thing about it is the children's voices?"

"You must call, mother!" said Venetia, decidedly. "I am so curious to see what the Carews are like. You might ask them to tea. That would not ruin us. I suppose we may cling to the cup that cheers, even if cabbages are in future to be the main feature of our other repasts!"

But Mrs. Dean had of late years shrunk from all social intercourse, and she delayed calling at Fern Cottage, so that the acquaintance with the Carews came about by accident, after all, more than a week after their arrival.

Lilly and Violet, the youngest of the Ashley children, were gathering wildflowers in the wood, which bordered one side of their father's grounds, when they suddenly came face to face with a little girl in a white frock

and crimson cloak, who ran up to them sobbing out that she was lost.

The sisters were only twelve and thirteen, but no doubt they seemed quite venerable protectors to the mite of five, who clung to them piteously, saying that she was "Dolly," and was so tired and hungry.

"She must be staying with the Carews," suggested Violet. "We had better take her there."

"That's papa," volunteered Dolly. "He's Mr. Carew, and we only came here a little while ago. Do take me home, please. Papa will be so glad!"

There was no resisting the small damsel's entreaties. Lilly and Violet took each a hand, and between them they half led, half carried, Miss Carew to the gate of Fern Cottage, where her father met them, looking much relieved at the sight of his little runaway.

"You must come in and rest," he said, kindly, to the two girls. "It was very good of you to be so kind to Dolly. You naughty child, don't you know you might have been lost in the wood like poor little Red Riding Hood?"

"No wolf now," said Dolly, wiffully, "and good little girls bring me home. I want my tea!"

"You shall have it by all means, you small philosopher, and perhaps these young ladies will have some with you. Will you tell me your names, my dears?"

"I am Violet Dean, and this is my sister Lilly," replied the elder of the two visitors. "We live at Ashley Place!"

Perhaps something of his landlord's selfish character had been told to Mr. Carew, for a shadow flitted across his face, as he heard the name of Dean. It soon passed away, and he played the part of a very hospitable host to the little girls.

"They are very nice," said Dolly, approvingly. "Will they come again if their dad lets them?"

It was comical to see the way in which the little creature clung to her father; the tall, soldierly man and the tiny child seemed all the world to each other.

Mr. Carew smiled.

"I fancy there is someone else to be considered, Dolly. These young ladies are more fortunate than you. They have a mamma."

"Mother is never cross!" said Lilly, frankly. "She let's us do anything in the world, so long as it isn't wrong. The Squire won't; he thinks we are a great mistake."

"Why?" inquired Mr. Carew, gravely.

"He didn't say. He told mother once he hated children, but if he had to have a big family it was a pity they were all the wrong sort! That was before he went away last time."

"Does not your father live at home?"

"Oh, no! He always wants a change!" said Lilly, naively. "He says a month of us is too much for him. He goes away to London or Paris, while mother takes care of us!"

"But doesn't mother ever have a change?"

"Mother can never afford a holiday," said Lilly candidly. "She went to Morton once, three years ago; but she generally sends Venetia. She says Sisie ought to have a treat."

If to go three miles to a little market-town was considered a treat, surely these children's lives must be dull enough!

"I will take you home," said Mr. Carew, when they had finished tea. "I want to ask Mrs. Dean if she will let you come sometimes to play with my little girl."

Before he reached Ashley Place he had quite won the childish hearts, and had gleaned a pretty correct idea of the state of things in the Squire's family. The little girls made no complaints, but it was easy to see they feared their father above all else, and the love of their hearts centred round their mother and elder sister.

"Venetia is so good," said Lil, simply, as they turned in at the big gates. "Betty says

she might go away and be a great lady any day, if it wasn't for us!"

Mrs. Dean received her visitor with a quiet grace; and Carew, who had heard of her long ago in her prosperous days as a queen of fashion, and an extravagant beauty, was touched by the pathos of her face.

"I hope you will forgive my intrusion," he said, courteously; "but my little girl has fallen in love with your daughters, and I have promised to beg you to let them come and play with her sometimes."

Mrs. Dean looked bewildered.

"Are you really Mr. Carew?"

"Assuredly. I hope you do not doubt me?"

"It is all Paul's fault," said Venetia, indignantly. "He made us think you were about eighty, Mr. Carew, and that your daughter was a middle-aged lady!"

"Dolly is just five!"

"Venetia," said her mother, "how could you make such a mistake?"

"It wasn't my fault," said Venetia, pointing. "Paul Clinton was talking about Mr. Carew, and I said Miss Carew would be moped to death if she was used to balls and parties, and he told me when I saw her I should understand she was not of an age to care for such things."

Carew was laughing heartily.

"And you forthwith imagined her a prim, strong minded spinster of fifty, my poor little Dolly? I quite understand it all."

"And, of course, that big empty room is to be her nursery?" exclaimed Venetia. "Do you know, Mr. Carew, I decided you were an author, and required plenty of room to stalk up and down while you planned out your stories!"

He joined heartily in the laugh that followed, and somehow that laugh broke down all constraint, and Mrs. Dean began to feel as though she had known her husband's tenants for years.

"I am afraid you will find the Cottage very dull, Mr. Carew!" she said, kindly. "My husband always says this place is beyond the pale of civilisation."

"I am not afraid," he answered, gravely. "I have been away from England so long that there is something delightful in being back in my native land once more, and I think the country round here looks lovely! I hope you will let your children come and see Dolly, Mrs. Dean? She has rather a lonely life, poor little thing!"

"They shall come willingly," she answered. "There are too many of them for us to feel dull. My husband says six girls are quite an affliction, but I have never found them too many."

"The Squire would have found six boys a great deal more expensive," retorted Venetia, hotly. "They are dear little things, and he ought to feel proud of them."

"Doesn't he?" asked Mr. Carew, gravely, when Venetia had turned to walk down to the gate with him—a mark of courtesy she always showed to their rare visitors.

"The Squire is proud of nothing that does not contribute to his own comfort," she said, scornfully. "If ever you make acquaintance with my stepfather, Mr. Carew, you may boast you have seen the most selfish of men!"

"Your stepfather?"

"Oh! yes. I am not a Dean, or perhaps I should not speak so freely. I was two years old when mother married the Squire, and it was just the most unlucky day of her life!"

Carew smiled.

"I hope you do not say that because he has been unfortunate?"

"I say it because I detest him! He doesn't trouble us much. He only comes home about twice a year, and I can assure you those are not joyous occasions. Even the children are afraid to laugh, and mother looks scared to death. The head of the family has a most depressing influence over us all!"

"I should not think you were easily depressed, Miss—Venetia?"

"My name is Dacosta," said Venetia, quietly; "and, of course, I have to stand up for the rest. I am a strong-minded young woman, Mr. Carew."

"I doubt it. You don't look the character."

"Oh, I haven't taken to blue spectacles and semi-masculine attire, but my principles are quite decided. I think men are a great mistake, and that women ought not to let themselves be trampled on."

Carew was laughing.

"You speak as though the said trampling were our favourite occupation, Miss Dacosta?"

"Well," said Venetia, thoughtfully, "I think it is!"

"Your experience must have been unfortunate."

"I don't know many men. Our lawyer, Mr. Clinton, is devoted to his wife, and a really kind considerate person, but then I look on him as the exception that proves the rule."

"Do you mean the gentleman you call 'Paul'?"

"No, his father. Paul is utterly spoiled; this way in life has been too easy. His position is ready-made, and he is sure to end by marrying some silly girl, who will let him rule over her like a monarch!"

"He did not strike me as such a masterful man. Is the young lady already found?"

"I believe not; but the girls at Morton are incorrigibly silly. I believe any one of them would feel flattered if Paul Clinton asked her to marry him!"

"Well, Miss Dacosta, I'm afraid I can't rise to the heights of your reasoning. If my Dolly were grown up I should feel flattered at such a man as Paul Clinton falling in love with her. I took an immense fancy to the young fellow, do you know?"

CHAPTER IV.

"What do you think of Carew?"

It was a month or so later. Venetia Dacosta and Myrtle had been spending the day with Mrs. Clinton, and Paul was walking with them in the pleasant, old-fashioned garden, after the simple high tea, to which the lawyer's wife clung in preference to a formal late dinner.

"I don't think at all! It is no concern of mine if he likes to be absurd!"

"My dear girl, that very remark implies you have thought about Mr. Carew, or you wouldn't call him absurd."

"I hate mysteries!"

"But in this case what mystery exists? I am sure Carew lives openly enough. He never shuts himself up, or courts retirement. He welcomes visitors at any hour, and accepts most of the invitations that he receives. You are prejudiced against him because he is the Squire's tenant!"

"I am not prejudiced at all! And I say he is mysterious. He never mentions his past life."

"Yes he does, Venetia," put in Myrtle, rather timidly. "He came to tea with Dolly one day last week when you were out, and he told mother he was so anxious about her because her mother died of consumption, and that he thought South America did not suit her, and that is why he brought her home."

"There, Venetia!" said Paul, triumphantly. "Confess you were wrong!"

"I shan't! I keep to my own opinion. Mr. Carew is mysterious! He is evidently rich. I suppose, Paul, you won't deny that?"

"He is decidedly rich. Query, is being rich mysterious?"

"I won't talk at all if you interrupt me! Why in the world should a rich man come to Fern Cottage? Mr. Carew might have brought an estate in the country, or rented a house at some fashionable watering place!"

Why in the world should he bury himself in this lonely place, when the only neighbours within walking distance are cottagers and ourselves? Then he never speaks of himself. Whether he made his money in trade, or came into it through a relation's death, or was born to it, who knows? When did he leave England? Why did he go? Where are his relations and his wife's? Why with all his wealth does he choose to live in a little cottage? Tell me this, and then I'll admit he is not mysterious!

She saw Mrs. Clinton and her husband coming out of the house, and went to join them. Myrtle and Paul were left alone.

"Well, Myrtle," said the young man good-temperedly, "How cross we have made Venetia. Why in the world does she speak so bitterly against poor Carew?"

Myrtle shook her head. She was better looking now than when the Squire spoke so cruelly of her plainness.

Her complexion had cleared, her auburn hair shone like silk in the sunlight, and there was something interesting about her wistful smile, and the sensitive lines of her mouth.

Venetia was a beauty, but her half-sister's face had a strange, pathetic charm of its own. Paul wondered, as he looked at Myrtle to-night, how they could ever have thought her plain.

"I think Sissie is annoyed with Mr. Carew," Myrtle said frankly. "You know we are so used to her ruling us, we all like it; and sometimes, when she is declaiming about women's rights, and telling mother what to do, Mr. Carew looks at her in a puzzled way, as though he felt bewildered, and she does not like it."

"I believe you are right, Myrtle," said Paul, struck by a sudden thought. "We are all used to bow down before Venetia, and accept her sway. Perhaps we have spoiled her a little among us, and now she strikes a stranger as dictatorial and unamiable. Is that what you mean?"

Myrtle nodded.

"Mother likes Mr. Carew, and he has been, oh! so kind to the children. He seems always thinking of how to give them pleasure, and it is done so nicely, Paul, just as though he did not see how poor we are. The little ones are quite fond of him, and mother said once she was thankful he had come to Fern Cottage."

"And Venetia?"

"Sissie said it was only a refined kind of charity, and that she hated taking alms. And now, Paul, whenever Mr. Carew comes, she tries to avoid him. It is such a pity."

"We have spoiled her, that's about it," said Paul, gravely. "Don't fret, Myrtle, it'll come right."

Myrtle shook her head.

"Venetia is so beautiful," said the girl, who had been taught from childhood that she was plain, "and so things from her must wound people, and she is always trying to snub Mr. Carew."

"I rather think Carew is old enough to take care of himself, Myrtle," said Paul, lightly; "and as to snubbing people it's a way Venetia has. Why, I'm sure she has snubbed me unmercifully, and I don't think she's over gentle with you."

"But I am so stupid," said Myrtle, sadly. "You see, Venetia is so bright and clever; it's not wonderful she can't have patience with me. I often think, perhaps, when Sissie is married, and I have to be the eldest daughter, mother will be dreadfully vexed that I am so clumsy."

"You are not clumsy, Myrtle. It's just a way you have got into of comparing yourself with Venetia, and fancying you must be an ignoramus because you are not just like her! If only you would come out, and have a little more courage, you would be another creature. You just let Venetia sit on you instead of standing up for your rights!"

"But I haven't got any rights!" said Myrtle, simply. "I shall never be like Venetia!"

"Never!" said Paul, with a droll smile. "Why, before Venetia was seventeen (you're seventeen now, aren't you, Myrtle?) she ruled the whole family, and was as quite as grown up and dignified as she is now. I can't fancy you ruling the family, and administering snubs all round when they displeased you."

"I never could," confessed Myrtle; "but when Sissie is married I shall have to try."

"Don't!" said Paul Clinton, laughing. "You would never succeed; and, mark my words, Myrtle, one gets tired of always being kept in order. Let the mother and children have an easier way if you ever become the eldest daughter at home; but I don't think you ever will."

"Mother says Venetia is sure to marry, because she is so pretty!"

"I don't think she will marry yet awhile," replied Paul, gravely, "and I believe you will never be left at Ashley Place without her!"

They went indoors then, and Paul Clinton made no attempt to explain his speech; only when the sisters had driven off in his mother's comfortable brougham, he stood by the open window watching the carriage till it was out of sight; and old Mrs. Clinton, noticing the grave look on his face, said wistfully,—

"I really think your heart is caught at last, Paul, and that you will bring me home a daughter. Venetia grows lovelier every time I see her."

"I would not marry Venetia Da Costa, mother, if there was no other woman in the world; she is eaten up with pride and self-will. Nothing but a great sorrow or a passionate love will ever soften her."

Mrs. Clinton defended her favourite bravely. "I am sure, Paul, she is a most amiable girl, a model daughter and sister. What would they have done at Ashley Place all these years without her?"

"I think they would have learned their own value," replied Paul. "Venetia sits upon them all till Mrs. Dean is a nonentity in her own household, and Myrtle is treated as a little girl in pinafores."

"Myrtle is nothing but a child!"

"She is a very affectionate, sweet-tempered girl," said Paul, gravely, "and I fancy would do more to make home happy than Miss Da Costa, with all her beauty and genius. A man might do worse than marry Myrtle Dean, mother, although she will never be a beauty, and has not a penny of fortune."

Perhaps he was hard on Venetia, and did not understand all she was suffering in those summer days, for Venetia had a grievance peculiarly her own. She was intensely proud, and it hurt her deeply that her mother and the children should accept kindnesses out of their power to return. Claude Carew was always sending presents of choice fruit, poultry, cream, and now-laid eggs. He insisted on the children spending the day with Dolly once or twice a week, and he delighted in leading his pretty basket carriage to Mrs. Dean whenever he could prevail on her to go for a drive.

Venetia ought to have been pleased. She knew that her mother had often longed for such an enjoyment, that she had little strength for walking, and that change of scene was really a benefit to her. After the vegetarian diet suggested by Venetia, such gifts as Mr. Carew's were an immense blow. He never misad them, and they made a great difference to the fare at Ashley Place. They were offered, moreover, with a delicacy and taste which could not have been surpassed, and yet Miss Da Costa was angry, and called their new acquaintances presuming and ill bred.

"He will walk in next with a quartern loaf under one arm, and a pound of tea under the other!" she cried, irritably, the day after their visit to Mrs. Clinton, when Mr. Carew had taken advantage of her absence to send some grouse he had received from a friend in Scotland. "Mamma, have you no pride?"

"Very little, I am afraid, Venetia. It has been so crushed out of me; and, besides, I am

sure Mr. Carew means kindly. He is a perfect gentleman."

"And we are beggars!"

"My dear child," said the mother, fondly. "You, at any rate, are not a beggar. If the shifts of our life here are too painful to you, shall I write to Mr. Arundel, and ask him to find you a more congenial home? I cannot bear for our trials to distress you."

Venetia stamped her foot.

"That would make me miserable. Mother, don't you know I would rather starve with you than go away? I only ask you not to accept such gifts from a stranger."

"But, Venetia, it would hurt Mr. Carew if I were to refuse, and he so counts on the children's companionship for little Dolly! He says she looks ever so much stronger since they came to Fern Cottage."

Now, perhaps, Venetia was inconsistent. She professed to hate the father. She never lost a chance of snubbing him, but she was devoted to Dolly. The little maid had taken a violent fancy to Miss Da Costa, and it was fully returned. There was nothing Venetia would not do for Mr. Carew's daughter, while her manner to himself was barely civil.

"Is the Squire coming home this year?" asked Venetia, letting the subject of Mr. Carew's benefits drop. "The children say you had a letter yesterday. I was hoping now we were in August he did not mean to trouble Ashley Place this side of Christmas."

"Venetia, do remember he is my husband!"

Venetia pouted.

"I am not likely to forget it. Well, mother, is your husband coming here this year?"

"No!"

"Then why did he write?" Then catching sight of her mother's face she added, bitterly, "Oh, you need not tell me. I can guess—money!"

Mrs. Dean sighed.

"My dear child, you must try and not judge him hastily. When I married him he had five thousand a year!"

"He has fourteen hundred now!" said Venetia. "About three times as much as he allows you. What does he do with it?"

"He speculates, I think!"

"I believe he gambles," said Venetia, hotly, "or else why, when he writes for money, is he always in such a desperate hurry for it?"

Mrs. Dean declined to notice this speech, and Venetia went on.

"How much is it?"

"Fifty pounds, he says," went on the poor wife, hurriedly. "I shall have it back out of his Michaelmas rents."

"Of course you won't! Did he know you had paid Stubbs?"

"Yes, I told him!"

"Oh, dear! We have been living on cabbage and salt pork! Not one of the children has had a new frock all the summer, and now he comes down on you for fifty pounds. I should refuse flatly; but I am quite sure you will send it."

"My dear, I have not fifty pounds in the world! The Squire says I must raise it somehow, and so I am going into Morton this afternoon. Don't look alarmed, Venetia. I have not borrowed Mr. Carew's carriage. I would not for such an errand."

"Shall you borrow of the Clintons?"

"I dare not borrow money lest I might be unable to pay it. Your father says I am to dispose of some of the plate!"

"Just like him! I suppose he expects us to eat with steel forks, and stir our tea with pewter spoons in future!"

"It won't be so bad as that, dear! The spoons and forks need not go; but our day for dinner-parties is over. I think the candelabra and such-like things could be spared."

"Shall I go to Morton instead of you?"

"No, my dear!" replied Mrs. Dean, kissing her, for she knew what the offer must have cost. "Stanway, the jeweller, knows me, and it will be better for me to go myself."

It was a scorching hot afternoon; and, despite her objections to Mr. Carew, Venetia would rather have seen her mother in his pony carriage than starting to walk five miles to Morton. But there was no vehicle for hire in the village, and the Squire's letter had been too urgent for his wife to delay.

"I will get a fly from the King's Arms to come home in," she said cheerfully to Venetia, as she started. "Don't wait tea for me, my dear!"

Venetia felt decidedly out of temper with herself, the Squire, and things in general. She took up a book which Mrs. Clifton had lent her, and sat down in the coolest spot she could find, to be discovered presently by Mr. Carew.

"I have come to borrow one of your little sisters, Miss Da Costa!" he said, pleasantly. "If your mother can spare one to play with Dolly!"

"Lilly or Violet will be delighted!" said Venetia, stiffly. "Mother has gone out!"

"In this heat? I thought it was only a sun-shipper like myself who cared to walk in such weather!"

"Mother has gone to Morton. She started an hour ago."

"Not walking?"

"Yes. There are no flies to be hired here. She promised to come back in one from the King's Arms."

Mr. Carew looked indignant.

"I think you might have allowed her to use my phaeton. I know you hate me pretty thoroughly, Miss Da Costa; but to let your mother walk five miles in this heat rather than allow me the pleasure of driving her seems absurd."

"It was mamma's own doing. She has gone into Morton on private business," said Venetia, hotly. "Besides, why should you always be doing things for us? We are not beggars, and we have no claim on you!"

"You are certainly not beggars; but your mother and the children have the strongest possible claim on me," replied Mr. Carew, gravely.

"I don't believe it!"

He bowed.

"I am aware you hold a very evil opinion of the Squire, your stepfather, but in his younger days he was very different from what he is now, and once—it was long ago—before ever you were born, he saved my life."

Venetia started.

"I never knew you had met the Squire!"

"I tell you it was long ago. I have not seen him for years and years, but the fact remains, I owe my life to him. He saved me from drowning when I was a child not bigger than Dolly. He sent me to school, and paid my bills ungrudgingly until I was old enough to shift for myself."

"It sounds wonderful! If he was so kind to you why didn't you go and see him when you came back to England?"

"Because we quarrelled years ago. Before ever I went abroad, he told me he wished never to see my face again. I am a proud man, Miss Da Costa, and I could not bring myself to seek the Squire of Ashley after that; but for the sake of the old days when he was so kind to me, I would fain do somewhat for his children. I cannot feel as a stranger to your mother and sisters when I remember that for years the Squire was like a father to me."

"Does mamma know?"

"I have told no one but you. I only spoke of the past because I know you have thought me presumptuous in seeking your mother's friendship. I believe you even grudge me the affection of your little sisters!"

"You were so rich," she said, simply, "and I thought you liked patronising us."

"I never dreamed of patronage. I only wanted to be friends for old time's sake."

"And did you know The Place as well as the Squire? Did you ever come to see him here? Why, you must have seen Kenneth,

mother's stepson, who died just after her marriage?"

"I went to school with Ken. We were almost inseparable in those days. When the split came we went abroad together. He was like a second self to me."

"How you must have missed him when he died! Was it you who sent the news to the Squire?"

"I was at death's door myself then. No one ever expected me to recover. And now, Miss Da Costa, do you think, after this explanation, you will allow your family to be friendly with me?"

"You speak as though I ordered them about!"

"I believe you govern them completely. A very unhappy experience of man has made you a believer in women's rights, Miss Da Costa, and among those rights you count being head of the family."

"I think women ought not to be trampled on!"

He smiled.

"I will promise not to trample on Mrs. Dean or any of her children if you will bury the hatchet, Miss Da Costa, and let us be friends."

"I will think about it," said Venetia, gravely; but when Mr. Carew had walked home in triumph, with Lilly and Violet on either side, she fell to thinking of something very different.

What was the romance of his life? Was that beautiful pictured face in Dolly's nursery the portrait of his wife and the child's mother? Had he loved her very much, and was it her loss that had brought that grave, almost sad, expression into his face?

"I daresay she was just a beauty, and nothing else," thought Venetia, bitterly. "Men like that always like weak, yielding women, with not an idea beyond their own homes. He never mentions her, and he has left off his mourning, but I believe his heart is buried in her grave. Well, at any rate, she had a happy life, poor girl. Any woman whom Mr. Carew loved would have that," and then Venetia roused herself from her day-dream, blushing crimson that a practical, strong-minded young person like herself had actually been idiotic enough to waste her thoughts on love!

CHAPTER V., AND LAST.

Mrs. Dean came back, weary and dispirited. Stanham, the jeweller had been civility itself, but he had assured her he was quite unable to purchase such valuable articles as those she wished to dispose of, and that though he would try to find someone willing to buy them it would be weeks, perhaps months, before he found a customer.

"What are we to do?" she asked, sorrowfully. "Why, your father will be expecting the money to-morrow very likely."

Another time Venetia would have rejoiced at the Squire's discomfiture, but to-night her heart was softened by Carew's confidence. It had been her boast hitherto that her stepfather had never performed one unselfish action.

Now, at any rate, she knew he had once risked his life to save another's, Venetia felt she had misjudged him, and was ready to make amends.

"I suppose the things are really worth more than fifty pounds, mamma?"

"My dear, real silver will always fetch its weight at so much an ounce. If I could only go to London, and take the best of the plate with me, I could easily manage."

"You would not like to go. I could take care of the children."

"My dear, I have not been in London for ten years. If I went by myself I should be terrified."

"I will go if you like, mamma."

"You!" Mrs. Dean was amazed. "Why, Venetia, it would hurt you terribly to go on such an errand."

"No it wouldn't," said Venetia, stolidly. "There is nothing mean or dishonest in selling what you no longer want. Mr. and Mrs. Arundel are in London now, and I am sure they would take me in for the night. I think, too, Mr. Arundel would tell me the best place to go to about the things."

"Venetia! Are you sure you don't mind?"

"I am quite willing to go," said the girl, slowly. "You will only worry yourself to death if nothing is done. I can telegraph to Mr. Arundel from Morton station, and then he will meet me at Charing Cross."

"And how will you get to Morton. I am sure Mr. Carew—"

"We need not trouble him," said Venetia. "I will send in a message by the postman to the King's Arms that we shall want a fly for the morning train. You had better pack up everything you want me to take in a strong wooden box; my own things will go in a hand-bag."

It was accident, of course, which made the first person Venetia encountered on Morton platform Mr. Carew, but, all the same, she was annoyed. She had undertaken the expedition out of pity for her mother. She had not wanted the master of Fern Cottage to know about it. If he was going up to town by the first quick train, why could he not have said so yesterday?

Carew was a man of the world. He betrayed not the least surprise at seeing Venetia.

"Are you going up to London, Miss Da Costa? You have a nice day, much cooler than it has been all the week."

"Yes," said Venetia, frigidly. "I am going up. My guardian will meet me at Charing Cross."

"And till then I hope you will accept my escort!" he said, pleasantly.

"No, I shan't. You are going first-class. I always travel third."

Mr. Carew said nothing then, but after he had been to the booking-office he calmly held up for her inspection a third-class ticket.

"I hope now you will not decline my escort?"

"I can't forbid your riding where you please, but I think you are foolish."

"May I ask why?"

"You would have been much more comfortable first-class."

"I should have been much hotter. Now, Miss Da Costa, here comes the train. We are in luck's way; she is punctual to a minute."

There were very few passengers. The traffic from Morton was chiefly local, and this was the London fast train, not stopping again for thirty miles.

Mr. Carew handed Venetia to an empty carriage. No one followed them, so when the train started they had every chance of a prolonged tête-à-tête.

He did not attempt to question her as to her journey, or its object, but talked on indifferent subjects, till she suddenly said,—

"You never told me yesterday you were going to London?"

"I did not make up my mind till after the evening post came in."

"The evening post does not often trouble us," said Venetia, frankly; "nothing comes by it except the Squire's letters, and they are like angel's visits, few and far between."

"Have you heard from him lately?"

"Mother had a letter from him the day before yesterday. He wrote from Homburg, and gave no hint of coming home."

"Ah!"

And incomprehensible though it seemed, Venetia really fancied that Mr. Carew was relieved by her reply.

"Do you return to-night, Miss Da Costa? I am hoping to catch the two o'clock train."

"Oh no! I shall sleep in town. Your business can't be very important if it takes such a short time."

"I believe half-an-hour will settle it, but for all that, Miss Da Costa, it is important!"

"Why are we stopping here?" asked

Venetia, suddenly. "There does not seem to be a station?"

As a fact, the engine-driver had pulled up, perceiving the signals were against him. Instead of shunting his train on to the siding he let it remain on the rails, never suspecting that the express to the north had not passed.

Almost as Venetia spoke the express issued at full speed from the tunnel. There was a moment's panic. The driver of the up-train tried too late to steer on to the siding; the man in charge of the express to the north made a frantic effort to shut off steam, too late to save the accident, though no doubt it decreased the loss of life.

The trains collided, the rear half of the express and the last carriages of the up-train escaped uninjured; but between them lay a terrible debris of broken woodwork, of dead and suffering humanity.

To her life's end Venetia never forgot the horrors of that moment. With the fearful crash ringing in her ears she was thrown violently off her seat, and could barely distinguish Carew's voice.

"Keep perfectly still," he implored her; "it is our only chance."

The carriage had been overturned completely, the lamp was out. A weight of broken woodwork seemed to Venetia to be crushing the life out of her. All her limbs ached, and yet she was painfully, acutely sensitive to all that went on.

She could not see Carew. For a moment she feared he was dead, and she called his name. He responded faintly.

"Is this death?"

"I hope not! They will come as soon as they can get help. Keep up your courage."

"My head feels on fire," murmured Venetia. "Oh, Mr. Carew! if I never see mother again, give her my love!"

Her boasted independence, her vaunted strength of mind, forsook her then. She leant on Carew for advice and comfort as helplessly as the weakest of her sex.

"If only I could move to help you," he said anxiously, "but I am jammed down."

"They will come soon," she answered. "This seems like a living death; and oh!" for her mind was beginning to wander with the pain and fright, "you'll tell mother we died friends."

It was ten minutes, though it seemed hours, before assistance came. Strong, willing arms literally dug away the debris of the carriage, and rescued those who had seemed to be entombed in a living grave.

One of Carew's arms were broken, and he was terribly bruised, but he had no vital injuries. With Venetia it was different. She lay quite motionless, and never opened her eyes when they called on her, and tried to rouse her.

"Where are we?" asked Mr. Carew. "Not far from a station, I hope."

"Only a mile out of Belton," replied the doctor. "There is a very good hospital there."

"She must go to some quiet place where her mother can come and nurse her," said Carew, simply. "Don't think of expense. She is just the kind of nature to be miserable in a hospital."

The doctor suggested there was a trained nurse at Belton who sometimes received invalids.

Carew caught at the idea. Happily there had been but few passengers in the wrecked carriage; and, alas! to most of those their injuries had proved fatal.

He and Venetia were the only two sufficiently injured not to be able to return to their homes. Some half-dozen were bruised and shaken, and eight were beyond all human aid; that was the total.

Carew dictated a message to Paul Clinton. He felt instinctively he could not send the bad news straight to Mrs. Dean.

"Serious accident. Miss Da Costa much injured. Break it to her mother, and bring Mrs. Dean here."

Paul did not prove unworthy of the trust reposed in him. At four o'clock that afternoon he drove up to the Nurse's house with Mrs. Dean in a fly.

Carew met them on the threshold. "There is no change," he said, sadly. "But Dr. Jill does not give up hope, though he says she is in great danger."

It was a close fight with death. The September sun was pouring into the plain, bare-looking room at Nurse Guild's before Venetia was pronounced out of danger, and even then there lay weeks and months of an invalid's life before her. It would be long before she could walk again. She would never probably be the same strong, healthy girl she had been.

The tears poured slowly down her face.

"I had better have died."

"Don't say that," pleaded her sister Myrtle.

"We could not spare you, Sissie."

"I never did anything to make you love me," sobbed Venetia. "I only ordered you about, and managed things."

Myrtle kissed her.

"Don't you know we would far rather have you weak and ailing than lose you? Oh! Venetia, you can't think how good everyone has been. Mrs. Clinton took all the children to Morton to stay with her except Lilly, who has been at Fern Cottage with Dolly, and Mr. Carew has brought mother news of them every day."

Venetia's next question was a strange one. "What became of the plate?" she asked, feebly. "Was it saved, and did mother get anyone else to sell it? How angry the Squire would be if he has been kept waiting for the money all this time."

Myrtle looked troubled.

"Papa does not want the money now, Sissie; and please do not speak unkindly of him."

"Why? Has he been ill, too?"

"Mrs. Clinton is spending the day with mother," said Myrtle, trying hard to change the subject. "May she come and see you, Sissie?"

The lawyer's wife understood more of illness than little Myrtle. She saw that Venetia would worry herself terribly if she thought she was being deceived, and so she told her the truth.

The Squire was dead. He must have died the very day he wrote to his wife, and Mr. Carew—who had a friend at Homburg—received the news the evening before his journey to town. He went to London solely to find out if it was true before he broke the blow to Mrs. Dean.

Venetia drew a long breath.

"I'm glad I thought kindly of the Squire just once. But, Mrs. Clinton, what will become of mother?"

"My dear, that is all settled."

"She has only eighty pounds a-year," fretted Venetia, "and Mr. Arundel won't let me help her. Of course Mr. King has taken possession of Ashley Place?"

"Not yet. It seems, Venetia, that though Mr. King's name was used, the real proprietor of Ashley is Mr. Carew."

"Oh!" Venetia drew a long breath. "Well, I don't think he will be hard on mother."

"My dear, have you ever heard of Kenneth Dean, the Squire's only son?"

"Yes. He died soon after mother married."

"He did not die. He had been given over by the doctors when the news was sent to his father, but almost by a miracle he rallied and recovered. He married an American heiress, and has since been known by her name."

"You need not go on," said Venetia, quietly. "It is Mr. Carew. He is Kenneth Dean—Dean of Ashley."

"Yes, and he is anxious to be a son to your mother."

"That explains why he always liked the children," said Venetia, "and hated me. Of course, they are his sisters. I am an alien."

"I do not think he hates you, Venetia?"

A week later Venetia was well enough to be dressed and lie on a sofa. It was wheeled into the little parlour, and then Mrs. Dean suggested her daughter should see Kenneth.

Poor woman, she had had terrible anxiety. Only now, that Venetia knew all, had she suffered her children to wear mourning for their father, or donned her own weeds.

"I don't want to see him!"

"My dear. He is almost your brother."

"He isn't—and I hate shams!"

"So do I," said Kenneth, pleasantly, as he entered unannounced. "Mrs. Dean, I am used to nursing and sick people. Will you leave me alone with Venetia for a little talk?"

A dead silence followed her mother's departure; then Venetia broke out impatiently.

"Have they told you?"

"That you are out of danger? Yes, and I am delighted to hear it!"

"That I shall be nothing but a useless log for months, perhaps years? I shall never be of any use to anyone. Oh, I had better have died!"

"I don't think so."

"Oh, you don't understand! You have taken my place! Mother will lean on you. You will help her?"

"I shall try to. You know I am her stepson, and I owe her a great deal for all she has suffered of late."

"I understand now why they all took to you, and why you hated me. Of course, the children were your sisters."

"Of course; but I never hated you, Venetia, though I am thankful you are not my sister!"

"I made myself tolerably disagreeable; but I must have been worse than I thought if you feel thankful we are not related."

Kenneth Dean smiled.

"You have had to try depending on others lately, Venetia. Was it really such miserable work? Did the world seem worse because you could not manage it?"

"I think you are cruel."

"I want you to answer me. Venetia, when we both thought death was near, you were willing to be friends. You forgot your opinion that men always trampled on women. Then, in that moment, you turned to me for help and sympathy, and forsook your favourite creed of women's rights."

"I shall have to forsake it always, I am afraid. What good would a poor weak creature like me be to the cause? I shall be fit for nothing but home."

"And you will want someone to take care of you."

"You need not taunt me with it if I shall. Myrtle will be a nice little companion for me."

"Only she has promised to be Paul Clinton's companion instead! They settled matters while you were so ill, and as soon as you are better they will be married."

"Oh!"

"But, Venetia, I am seeking a companion. I want someone to love me, and be a mother to Dolly! If you will trust yourself to me, I swear that I will make you happy."

"But you hate me?"

"I have loved you always. I have hoped for months that you would be my wife. Venetia, can't you trust me not to trample on you, even though I am one of those old-fashioned people who don't believe in women's rights?"

"It is not that."

"Are you thinking of Dolly? I fancied you loved the child?"

"I love Dolly dearly. I was thinking of her mother."

He stroked the fair head caressingly as he answered,—

"My Mary was one of the sweetest, gentlest creatures Heaven ever made. She loved me dearly, and I married her, poor child, because she had unwittingly betrayed her affection. I was very fond of her. I hope, I pray, I made her happy; but, Venetia, you need fear no

rival, dead or living. It is the first love of my heart that I offer you."

"And you will promise," said Venetia, presently, when a very great many important things had been settled, "you will promise me faithfully that when we quarrel—"

"Have you made up your mind we shall quarrel?" he interrupted her to ask.

"The best people quarrel sometimes," she retorted. "Promises that you will never taunt me with having changed my mind."

"Never! And you on your part will promise not to accuse me of tramping on you?"

Her eyes met his with a smile. Suddenly he stooped, and kissed her. It meant that the great cause had lost one zealous adherent. Venetia Dacosta was content to acknowledge man's supremacy, since she had promised to marry the last of the DUNES OF ASHLEY!

[THE END.]

FACETIÆ.

TWINS, like other misfortunes, never come singly.

"All's fair in love." "How about a brunette?"

Some men have an iron constitution; others steel.

The self-made man is frequently exceedingly proud of a very poor job.

SUITABLE uniform for Post Office officials.—Uniform politeness.

LIFE is too short to be spent in minding other people's business.

WHEN an army can't beat an enemy it can generally beat a retreat.

THE course of true love never did run smooth, and it wouldn't be half the fun if it did.

JACK: "A friend in need is a friend indeed." TOM: "Um—ye-es—if he doesn't need too much."

MR. SNIPPS: "Snipps, your chickens come over into my yard." MR. SNIPPS: "Yes, and they do not come back."

SURE ENOUGH.—"Do you believe in fate, Pat?" "Sure, an' phwat would we stand on without them?"

A RECENTLY PUBLISHED book is entitled "Half-hour with Insects." What a lively half-hour one can have with a bee!

Too much study is said to affect the mind; and we know of a number of cases where it would affect it very favourably.

GEORGE: "Misfortune has its recompenses." ETHEL: "How can you make that out?"

GEORGE: "The homely girl can eat onions."

EDITH: "It's little things that tell in this life." ALICE: "Well, you'd think so if you had two small brothers, as I have."

THE only confectionery a girl who works in a candy store cares for after a while is sweet hearts.

"A MARRIAGE may sometimes be a failure," remarked old Mrs. Ely, "but a funeral is always bound to be a success."

If you don't want to be robbed of your good name, don't have it inscribed upon your umbrella.

AN English publisher announces a new work entitled, "He Always Pleases His Wife." It is fiction.

SHE: "Miss Rodney always looks well for one who has so little to dress on." HE: "Yes, she is rather thin."

"GARDENING is a delightful occupation." "Of course, if one could procure a new backbone every morning."

GEORGE: "Tommy, is your sister in?" "Yes, but you'll have to wait a long time, 'cos she's sewing a button on a coat."

"Oh, that won't take long; I'll wait." "I wouldn't; there's a man in the coat."

BRAGG (compactly): "Sir, I am a self-made man!" FLAGG: "I carefree; you look like the kind of a man you'd be apt to make."

"He can trace his ancestry back to the flood." "O, pawaw. That's nothing. Everybody was in the swim then."

FAXON: "Another death by forgetting to turn off the gas." JACKSON: "Yes. This seems to be a gas trick fever."

"Now, ma'am," said the English servant. "ow will you 'ave the duck to-day? Will you heat it cold, or shall I eat it for you?"

JUSTICE DUFFY: "Have you ever taken an oath?" CRIMINAL: "Several times." "When was that?" "When I was in love."

WHY was Noah the greatest financier that ever lived? Because he floated a limited liability company when all the rest of the world was in liquidation.

THE man who is a long time making up his mind may arrive at a correct judgment; but it is generally too late to be of any use to him.

PHOTOGRAPHER: "If you please, ma'am, just a little smile. Thank you; a little more; look pleasant, you know. Now you may resume your natural expression; thank you."

FASHIONABLE LADY: "What is the matter with me, doctor?" "Please tell me the symptoms?" "There are none, doctor, and that's what worries me."

"Yes, he is dead. We shall have nothing more from his pen," said Mr. Brown sadly. "But he may write a posthumous book, you know," put in Mrs. Brown cheerfully.

HE: "Did my voice fill the room while I was singing?" SHE: "On the contrary, it had the opposite effect. A number of the audience went out."

"Your uncle will probably remember you when making his will." "Confound it! that's what I'm afraid of. If he remembers me, it's all up with me."

JOHNNY (sobbing): "Does it really h-h hurt you to wh-whip me, mamma?" "Ma: "Yes, my son; very much more than it hurts you." JOHNNY (drying his eyes): "I'm so glad!"

"What are you going to do with your boy?" "I think of getting him into the police force." "Has he any special qualifications?" "Well, he is never to be found when he is wanted."

HOST: "Just another wee drap 'fore you go—." GUEST: "Na, na. a'll tak' nae mair! I'm in a new lodgin', and I'm no vera weel acquainted with the stairs!"

"Can you lend me a fiver, Jack?" "I can; here it is." "I can never repay your kindness." "Never mind; repay the fiver, and let the kindness go."

CARRIE: "The greatest writers make mistakes." AUTHOR: "Yes; every writer is liable to put his mucilage-brush into the ink-bottle."

"WAITER, I've been here a full hour," said Chappie, impatiently. "I've been here since seven a.m.," returned the waiter. "It's time-some, ain't it?"

"WHAT is the difference between being toasted and being roasted?" "One is a moist proceeding, and the other an exceedingly dry one."

MRS. SLIMDIET: "The city water company has raised my rates." OLD BOARDER: "They must have found out that we have salt mackerel for breakfast."

"WHY, Janet! What in the world is the matter with Fido?" "He's got a severe cold, dear. I think I must have left his muzzle off too suddenly, you know."

FRANK: "Don't you admire Stella's piano execution?" MAY: "I do indeed! It isn't every girl who can slaughter four composers in one evening."

PRIMUS: "How absurd it is in Hawley to be always trying to prevent people from knowing his age! I can't understand it." SECUNDUS: "I can. He has a twin sister in society, man."

PROFESSOR (to Student): "What do you mean, sir, by swearing in this room, before me?" STUDENT: "I did not know that you wished to swear first, professor."

FANNY: "Are all canary birds yellow?" MOTHER: "Yes, my child." FANNY: "Well, how does a canary bird look when it has got the jaundices?"

MISS OLDMALD (school teacher): "How many million years old is the earth?" BRIGGS. POPIL: "Please, ma'am, I don't know. It was here when I came. How old is it?"

"I HATE this house cleaning business," sighed a disconsolate husband. "Wife, let's go live in a tent." "Better live in content," suggested his wife meekly.

"Do you quarrel with your neighbour yet about his hen coming over into your garden?" "No; we're all over that now." "Buried the hatchet?" "No, better still; buried the hen."

YOUNG LADY: "Whenever I danced with you, Mr. Crusher, I imagine myself to be a piano." CRUSHER: "How is that?" YOUNG LADY: "Because you always use my feet as pedals."

TEACHER: "So you cannot remember the names of the great lakes? Can't you keep them in your head?" JOHNNY: "No, mum; if I was to keep them lakes in my head I might get water on the brain."

MR. GILTMAN: "What have you done with my wife's pet poodle that I paid you ten shillings to steal?" DOG THIEF BILL: "I returned it this morning, and got the two pound reward she offered for it."

"HAVE you read Binka's book?" "Yes; and it makes me believe Binka must have a great mind." "Really?" "Yes; if he can understand what he has written he's a greater man than I have ever taken him for."

A DRUNKEN man will tumble out of a three-story window to a stone pavement, and get right up and dispute the distance with a neighbouring lamp-post; but if a temperance speaker happens only to run his toe against a big stone, the result is a broken leg.

A RECENT American town has settled the social question in a novel manner. Those who put out their washing belong to the aristocracy; those who do their own laundry work are members of the middle class; and those who take in washing form the lower class.

BRIDGET (to lady of the house): "Axin' yure pardon, mum, but might I be after askin' phwat thin things is in the plot?" MISTRESS: "Certainly. Those are Raphael's cherubs." BRIDGET: "Indade. Ah, thin, we was both wrong. I says they was twins, but Nora would 'av it they was bats."

MAMMA (to three-year-old daughter): "Frances, pick up your playthings and put them all away." FRANCES: "In a minute, mamma. Oh, let's play you's baby and I's mamma!" "All right, Frances; now I'm baby and you are mamma." "Well, now Baby can pick up her playthings, and put 'em away."

BRIGGS: "A friend of mine got off a bright thing the other day. He called on a young lady who had a pet dog she was trying to make bark, but the dog wouldn't, until finally she said, 'Fido, if you will bark for me, I'll kiss you.' Then my friend spoke up and said, 'I can bark pretty well myself.' Griggs: "Ha, ha! What did the girl say?" BRIGGS: "Nothing. She simply sent the dog away."

MISS ETHEL: "Yes, indeed, we girls are fully alive to the justice of the popular criticism on chattering women, and that is the reason we organised our thought club." MR. BLANK: "Thought club?" "Yes, and it is doing us a world of good, I assure you." "I do not for one moment doubt it, Miss Ethel. Pray tell me how you proceed." "Well, at the last meeting we talked for five hours on the advantages of silent meditation."

SOCIETY.

BIRTHDAY rings are beginning to be the rage among young misses all over the country.

A NOVELTY in lockets is one the upper half of which is of gold, the lower half being silver.

To meet the demand for one style of dressing the hair are plain bands of gold or silver to be worn as fillets.

THE new bridemaid's present is the lucky slipper brooch, made of gold, with a true lover's knot in jewels on the toe and red enamel heel. The pin is encased in a case made also in the shape of a shoe.

THE Empress of Austria, who has now taken up her residence at the Lainzer Chateau, has resided considerably benefit from her trip to Corfu, and is taking daily walks and drives in the extensive grounds of her lovely home.

TAN conversion of the Grand Duchess (Princess Elizabeth of Hesse) to the Orthodox Greek Church is now quite understood to have been compulsory, and if she had persisted in remaining a Lutheran she would have found it expedient to quit Russia.

AN instep pad is a new fad of those fair women who are so unfortunate as to be possessed of a "low bred" foot. It is simply a little linen pad fitted in place directly over where the instep should be, but very often is not.

EXTENSIVE and costly alterations and improvements have been carried out at Balmoral during the last few weeks, including the redecoration of several of the principal rooms in the Castle, and the entire reconstruction of the drainage and sewers.

THE abdication of King Charles of Portugal may, I hear, be expected at any moment. Although not yet thirty, he has grown so unwieldy as to be almost unable to move; and he wholly lacks both the energy and peculiar tact which made Dom Luis, his father, so popular with his subjects.

THE rage for gold has brought the gold snaze veil to the fore. Its popularity should be limited to women who are young, whose complexions are above reproach. Chantilly lace is dotted with tiny gold balls scattered here and there upon it.

THE German Emperor—if a certain French journal is correctly informed—appears to have had enough of "sermons by mystical Germans, who preach from ten to four," and has issued orders that no discourse by a Court Chaplain is to last for more than a quarter of an hour.

HIS small Majesty of Spain is said to be unrivalled in deeds of boyish mischief, and is generally pronounced to be "what nurses call a 'limb,'" so that it may be fairly assumed that his constitution is less feeble than it was when he was an infant. Very naughty little boys are seldom, if ever, delicate.

A new wedding present has seen the light in the shop windows of Gotham. It is "only a pansy blossom." The flower is of china, and is shaped exactly like a pansy, with up-rolling leaves. It is placed in a very beautiful case lined with sedge, and alongside of it is laid a Royal Worcester china spoon.

PRINCESS MARIANNE, the wife of Prince Lucien Bonaparte, died on the same day and at very nearly the same hour as the late Prince Napoleon. She was the beautiful daughter of the sculptor Conchetti, and her marriage, which was a love match, proved unhappy. She had been separated from her husband for forty years, although she would never consent to a divorce.

HERE is an idea for the benefit of silk gloves which have stretched in the wearing and become rather baggy. Turn them inside out, and re-sew each seam very carefully, taking in a little. This expedient will make those gloves fit quite elegantly once more.

STATISTICS.

THERE are always 5,000 British vessels at sea.

6,500,000 is the number of persons engaged in mining all over the world.

ONLY two Englishwomen in 100 now wear earrings.

THREE persons are cremated, on an average, every week at Woking.

TWENTY per cent. of the men over 25 in Germany are perfectly bald.

THE coldest weather ever recorded officially was at Verchojansk, Siberia, January 15, 1885, when the thermometer registered 90.4 degrees below zero; and the warmest was at Onargia, Algeria, July 17, 1879, when the thermometer in the shade showed 127.4 degrees.

GEMS.

THE way to get your children to go where you want them to is to walk the way you point.

THE thoroughly great men are those who have done everything thoroughly, and who have never despised anything, however small, of Heaven's making.

SOME people scorn to be taught, others are ashamed of it, as they would be of going to school when they are old; but it is never too late to learn what it is always necessary to know. And it is no shame to learn so long as we are ignorant—that is to say, so long as we live.

GOOD manners must have a solid foundation in kindness and self-control. To be genuine, they must be the fruit of sincerity and good feeling; and their exercise must be in conformity with the working of these qualities in the heart. No art can successfully counterfeit true elegance of manners and deportment. To be real, they must have roots deep below the surface in the soul and heart.

HOUSEHOLD TREASURES.

MAPLE SUGAR CANDY.—One cup of maple sugar, one-half cup of water, small bit of butter; boil ten minutes. When done add one teaspoonful of vanilla, and pour into buttered tins. It must not be stirred.

TO STEW FIGS.—Wash one pound of figs and put them on to simmer very gently with one pint of cold water for an hour. They must stew very slowly to make them swell, then add one teaspoonful of red currant jelly, or a little lemon juice and sugar may be added if liked.

SULTANA CAKE.—Three-quarters pound of flour, quarter of a pound of Sultana raisins, quarter of a pound of butter, one teaspoonful essence of lemon, six ounces of sugar, two ounces of orange peel, two eggs, one teaspoonful of baking powder, milk. Put the flour in a basin, and rub the butter carefully into it. Wash and dry the raisins, and add them, then the sugar, the orange peel (cut it thin slices), the baking powder, and the essence of lemon, mixing all well. Separate the yolks and whites of the eggs, putting the yolks in a small basin, and the whites on a plate; beat the yolks, and mix with them a teaspoonful of milk, and pour this among the ingredients in a basin, which should be wet like a stiff paste. With a clean knife beat the whites of the eggs up very stiffly, and add them last of all, mixing them gently in, then pour all into a well-greased cake tin, and bake for an hour and a half, but this time depends on the heat of the oven. This is a small cake, but you can double or triple the amounts of the ingredients if you wish a larger one.

MISCELLANEOUS.

FOUR out of the nine Emperors of Russia since Peter the Great have been assassinated.

THERE have been nine presidents of the Royal Academy since its establishment in 1768.

THE Congo river is fifteen miles wide in some places. Steamers often pass each other, but out of sight.

MEN of science declare that the orange was originally a berry, and that its evolution has been going on more than a thousand years.

RUSSIAN tea, poured upon finely chopped ice, served in tall, thin glasses, is acceptable and dainty for a summer drink in Russia.

HOT tallow is said to remove machine oil from white goods. Repeated applications will also remove ink stains, if exposed to the rays of the sun.

THE deepest boring ever made, that at Spersenberg, near Berlin, penetrates only 4,172 feet, about one thousand feet deeper than the famous artesian well at St. Louis.

SCIENTIFIC men say that the earth's age is about half-a-million years for the nebular and stellar period, and about twenty-five million—of which fifteen million are past—for the period of organic beings.

THE name "Indian" was given to the inhabitants of America by Columbus, from belief that the country which he had discovered was an extension of India, the country known to occupy the extreme of the Eastern hemisphere.

THERE is quite a movement in favour of the decimal system of measurement just now. When decimal measurements do come in it is to be hoped that they will not be confined to money and length, and such derivatives as volume and weight.

GOLD was first coined by Henry III., and copper made into British coin in 1772. Tin was used for coinage in 1680, and the national farthing was made of this Cornish product with a stud of copper let in the centre. In 1690 and 1691 tin halfpence were issued in considerable quantities. The only pure gold coins issued in English history were those of Henry III.

THE enduring odour of musk is demonstrated by the penetrating scent which still exists in and around the Mosque of St. Sophia in Constantinople, and which has constantly been diffused from its walls since the edifice was rebuilt by Justinian, over twelve hundred and fifty years ago. When the edifice was being reconstructed, between the years 532 and 538, the stones and bricks were laid in mortar mixed with a strong solution of musk.

THE proportions of the human figure are six times the length of the right foot. Whether the form is slender or plump, the rule holds good on an average. Any deviation from the rule is a departure from the beauty of proportion. It is claimed that the Greeks made all their statues according to this rule. The face from the highest point of the forehead, where the hair begins to the end of the chin, is one-tenth of the whole stature; the hand, from the wrist to the middle finger, is also one-tenth of the total height. From the crown to the nape of the neck is one-twelfth of the stature.

COAL when exposed to the weather, is acted on by the oxygen of the air up to a definite limit; it combines with the free hydrogen of the coal to form water, and with a part of the carbon to form carbonic acid. When the limit is reached, a certain amount of oxygen is yet taken up and mechanically held by the coal. Thus, as the result of weathering, coal loses some of its combustible constituents, and gains in weight owing to the absorption of oxygen. This may amount to as much as 4 per cent. on the original weight of the coal. The effect of weathering is greater the smaller and the more porous and lumpy.

NOTICES TO CORRESPONDENTS.

MATCH.—It is a matter for the county court to decide.
QUIKOTIC.—The Spanish pronunciation of the name is Dan Ki-hoti.

JEANETTE.—The largest railway station in Great Britain is St. Pancras, London.

ARABELLA.—Yes; a girl of eighteen may witness a signature.

GEOP.—Your own course will be to watch the announcements in the sporting papers.

WORRIED ANNE.—A married man may, if he pleases, leave all his property to his eldest son.

C. P. R.—Every receipt for any sum of £5 and upwards must bear a penny receipt stamp.

LITTLE NELL.—A blind person keeping a dog for guidance is exempt from liability to pay the dog license.

M. L.—The insurance company would only pay after proof of will or letters of administration.

VENUS'S LOVE.—The 1st Battalion Black Watch is stationed at Gibraltar, and the 2nd Battalion at Limerick.

ROVER.—A careful, steady man, young as you, and sound in health, is more likely to lose than gain by emigration.

INDIGNANT OW.—He may positively refuse to sell that or anything, and insist on the sum he purchaser leaving the shop.

ANXIOUS TO KNOW.—If the deceased was in debt to his landlord, the landlord has first claim on any property he may have left.

T. LOVE.—1. Depôts of only some ten or eleven cavalry regiments are at Canterbury. 2. You must ask recruiting sergeant.

BEATRICE.—The assessed tax of 12s. on dogs was repealed in March, 1867; and an Excise license of 5s. substituted.

GHOST QUEEN.—Jessie and Janet are quite dissimilar; the latter is a good old Franco-Scottish name, the first is an English nondescript.

TROUBLED MAUD.—The marriage would be legal if contracted in the name by which the man has always been known.

ALWYNNE.—The wife can will away her own property, but not money invested in the joint names of herself and her husband.

M. B.—Any person can get a copy of any will by applying at the district registry office, and paying the necessary fees.

E. HATTEY.—You are a yearly tenant, and must give six months' notice, expiring at the quarter day on which you entered.

JORY.—Honolulu is the capital of Hawaii, or Sandwich Islands. It is situated at about a third of the distance between San Francisco and Australia.

BLAIR.—A coachman is usually considered as being included in the category of "domestic servant," and so be entitled to a month's notice.

OUTHERENT.—The Act is explicit. The holder of a license must be 21 years of age—that is to say, he must have completed 21 years and entered his 22nd.

SAM WELLS.—As the name of a town or county, the word is pronounced as *spell—Derby*. In conjunction with a title it is usually pronounced as if *spell Derby*.

I. O. U.—An action to recover debt must be brought within six years of the last acknowledgment of the debt. If the six years have run out, and the acknowledgment is renewed, proceedings may be taken.

A. WARRIOR BOLD.—The bombardment of Alexandria was on July 11, 1882. The expedition for the relief of General Gordon was not until the autumn of 1884. Lord Wolseley arrived at Dongola in November of that year.

R. B.—As you are now 25 and under 26 years, you may purchase an annuity at the Post Office of £50, payable when you are fifty-five years of age, by a yearly payment of 6s. 8d.

NET BROWN MAID.—The local sanitary authority has power to prevent any person within its district from keeping any animal so as to be a nuisance or injurious to health.

WANDERER.—Hong Kong is far from being a desirable residence. It is really unhealthy to Europeans, though you may reside there for a number of years without experiencing any ill-effects.

BOITEFELY.—If an Englishman marries a French woman in France, according to the law of marriage in that country, the marriage would be recognised as legal in England.

OLENETH.—As a rule, the parents are not liable for debts contracted by children under twenty-one, unless the goods supplied were necessary not provided by the parents; the children living at home.

ROTH.—"Jimmie" is a reminiscence of the classical adjuration, "*O Gemini*," used by the Romans when they called upon the twins, Castor and Pollux, to help them.

GEOGRAPHICAL.—The Pyrenees are next to the Alps in elevation. The loftiest summit, Mount Paria, has an altitude of 11,770 feet. All the minor mountain ranges of Spain are connected with each other and with the Pyrenees.

BRITANNIA.—The order of the Naval Powers is Great Britain, France, Italy, Russia, Germany, Austria. The distance between France and Italy is probably much more imaginary than real, greater in ships than in active efficiency.

A WOULD-BE MISSIONARY.—Young men are trained for missionary work through the agency of the missionary societies, both Church of England and Nonconformist. Your parish clergyman or minister would be the first person to apply to.

MURCHIEP.—Parents are not liable for damage done by their children, but the children may be summoned, and fined if the justices think them old enough to be responsible. In that case the fine would probably be paid by the parents.

AN OLD SWEETHEART OF MINE.

As one who comes at evening o'er an album all alone
 And muses on the faces of friends that he has known,
 So I turn the leaves of fancy till in shadowy design
 I find the smiling features of an old sweetheart of mine.

The lamplight seems to glimmer with a flicker of surprise
 As I turn it low to rest me of the dandle in my eyes.
 And I light my pipe in silence, save a sigh that seems to yoke
 Its fate with my tobacco and to vanish in the smoke.

'Tis a fragrant retrospection—for the loving thoughts that start
 Into being are like perfumes from the blossoms of the heart;
 And to dream the old dreams over is a luxury divine
 When my transient fancy wanders with that old sweet-heart of mine.

Though I hear beneath my study, like a fluttering of wings,
 The voices of my children and the mother as she sings,
 I feel no twinge of conscience to deny me any theme
 When care has cast her anchor in the harbour of a dream.

In fact, to speak in earnest, I believe it adds a charm
 To spice the good a trifle with a little dust of harm,
 For I find an extra flavour in memory's mellow vine
 That makes me drink the deeper to that old sweetheart of mine.

A face of thy beauty and a form of airy grace
 Float out from my tobacco as the gentils from the vase;
 And I thrill beneath the glances of a pair of azure eyes
 As glowing as the summer and as tender as the skies.

I can see the pink sunbonnet and the little checkered dress
 She wore when first I kissed and she answered the
 "careless"
 With the written declaration that, "as surely as the
 vine
 Grew round the stump, she loved me"—that old sweet-heart of mine.

And again I felt the pressure of her slender little hand
 As we used to talk together of the future we had planned,
 When I should be a poet and with nothing else to do
 But to write the tender verses that she set the music to.

When we should live together in a cosy little cot,
 Hid in a nest of roses with a tiny garden spot.
 Where the vines were ever fruitful and the weather ever fine
 And the birds were ever singing for that old sweet-heart of mine.

When I should be her lover for ever and a day,
 And she my faithful sweetheart till the golden hair was grey;
 And we should be so happy that when either's lips were dumb
 They should not smile in Heaven till the other's kiss had come.

But ah! my dream is broken by a step upon the stair;
 And the door is softly opened—and, my wife is standing there,
 Yet with eagerness and rapture all my visions I resign
 To meet the living presence of that old sweet-heart of mine.

D. M. N.—Unless you have enjoyed an uninterrupted access to the light long enough to acquire a right, the owner of the adjoining premises may protect his own light-rights. It may save you expense to consult a lawyer at the outset.

JEANETTE.—Eggs inside eggs are by no means rare, but nevertheless always interesting as a remarkable freak of nature. A dealer would not value it, however, because it would be impossible for him to keep the curiosity long in its natural state.

HORACE.—The distinction of being the thickest-skinned quadruped belongs to the Indian rhinoceros, whose hide has a knobby or granulated surface, and is so impenetrable as to resist the claws of the lion or tiger, the sword, or the balls of the old-fashioned musket.

T. P.—In each respiration an adult inhales one pint of air. A healthy man respires sixteen to twenty times a minute, or 20,000 times a day; a child twenty-five or thirty-five times a minute. While standing the adult respiration is twenty-two times per minute; while lying down, thirteen.

POLLY.—To remove ink from paper, if not of too long standing, wet a teaspoonful of chloride of lime with just sufficient water to cover it. Pat, not rub, the spot gently for a few moments, using a soft cloth with the mixture, and the ink will slowly disappear. If one application is not sufficient, try a second.

MARCHIONESS.—The sting of the bee is so peculiarly constructed that if you pull it out, instead of relieving the pain it adds greatly to it, for instead of pulling out the poison, you push it into the flesh. This is not generally known, hence the severer pain from the sting. Scrape the sting out immediately with a knife, and you scrape the poison out also, and soon forget that you have been stung.

ROLAND.—Some rattan palms are low bushes, some are very tall trees, and some have a red-like slender stem, rarely more than an inch thick, which climbs like a vine over the tops of trees, sometimes for several hundred feet. These long stems have been used for making ships' cables, cables for suspension bridges, and other kinds of ropes. They have also been made into various kinds of plaited and wicker work.

WELSH.—To paste a large paper map on cloth, stretch the map on a flat table, tacking the edges if necessary; spread the paper face downwards on another table, and rub it over with perfectly smooth flour paste. If necessary, the paste must be passed through a fine wire-sieve; if properly made, this will not be required. Then lift the paper and place it paste side downwards on the map; lay another piece over it, and rub it down with the hand.

A VOLUNTEER.—The 21st Royal Scots, the oldest infantry regiment in the British Army, have, of course, the greatest number of honours, 21; 71st come next with 17; the 43rd have 14. Of course, as we have often explained, "honours" are an empty thing, or at least do not always accurately indicate the extent to which the regiment has "seen service." Regiments which have gone through later wars may have an honour for a whole campaign, while others that served in earlier fighting may have an honour for every battle they were in.

R. E. G.—Glycerine diluted with fresh lemon juice, and applied to the face night and morning, will soften and whiten the skin and help to remove freckles, if not of too long standing. The most effectual remedy for freckles is rusty nail-water, which is prepared by putting several rusty nails in a bottle of water; letting it stand for about ten days. Then apply the water with a sponge night and morning, letting it dry on the face. We cannot assure you that the freckles will not return if you expose yourself to the wind or sun. If a woman, you should wear a veil; if a man, a wide-brimmed hat.

BUTTERCUP.—To make gingerbread, take one-half teaspoonful each of salt, soda, and ginger, three tablespoonfuls of boiling water, and three tablespoonfuls of melted lard. Put in a cup and fill up with New Orleans treacle. Roll very thin, and as soft as possible. Bake in a quick oven. They will keep for weeks. Another recipe is this: Take two cupfuls of treacle, one cupful of brown sugar, one cupful of butter or lard, one tablespoonful of ginger, and one tablespoonful of soda, dissolved in a very little hot water. Mix very thick and roll thin.

CUCKOO.—Among the superstitions connected with the hearing of the cuckoo's first call are these: In the maritime Highlands and Hebrides, if the cuckoo is first heard by one who has not broken his fast some misfortune is expected. Indeed, besides the danger, it is considered a reproach to one to have heard the cuckoo while hungry. In France to hear the cuckoo for the first time fasting is to make the hearer an idle do-nothing for the rest of the year, or to numb his limbs for the same period. There is a similar belief in Somersetshire. In Northumberland one is told, if walking on a hard road when the cuckoo first calls, that the ensuing season will be full of calamity; to be on soft ground is a lucky omen.

QUEENIE.—For January we have a jacinth, or garnet, which denotes constancy, and fidelity in every engagement. February—Amethyst, insuring peace of mind. March—A bloodstone, denoting courage and secrecy in dangerous enterprises. April—Sapphire or diamond, signifying repentance and innocence. May—The green emerald, typical of love. June—An agate, meaning long life and health. July—Ruby or cornelian, which insures the forgetfulness or oneness of evils springing from friendship or love. August—Sardonyx, a happy married life. September—Chrysolite, which preserves from folly. October—Aquamarine or opal, which denotes bringing the owner fidelity and friendship. December—Turquoise or malachite, signifying the most brilliant success and happiness.

THE LONDON READER, Post-free. Three-halfpence Weekly; or Quarterly One Shilling and Eightpence.

ALL BACK NUMBERS, PARTS and VOLUMES are in print, and may be had of all booksellers.

NOTICE.—Part 254, Now Ready, price Sixpence, post-free, Eightpence. Also Vol. LV1, bound in cloth, 4s. 6d.

ALL LETTERS TO BE ADDRESSED TO THE EDITOR OF THE LONDON READER, 254, Strand, W.C.

††† We cannot undertake to return rejected manuscripts.

London: Published for the Proprietor, at 254, Strand, by J. R. SPENCER, and printed by WOODWARD and KIRKES, 70 to 76, Long Acre, W.C.

